1. ~~Heaven-haven~~
2. ~~The habit of perfection~~
3. ~~God’s Grandeur~~
4. ~~The Starlight Night~~
5. ~~Spring~~
6. ~~The Lantern Out of Doors~~
7. ~~The Candle Indoors~~
8. ~~The Sea and the Skylark~~
9. ~~The Windhover~~
10. ~~Pied Beauty~~
11. ~~As kingfishers catch fire~~
12. ~~Binsey Poplars~~
13. ~~Spring and Fall~~
14. ~~Carrion comfort~~
15. ~~Hurrahing in Harvest~~
16. ~~Inversnaid~~
17. ~~Duns Scotus’s Oxford~~
18. ~~Patience, hard thing~~
19. ~~My own heart let me have more pity on~~
20. ~~To What Serves Mortal Beauty?~~
21. ~~No worst there is none~~
22. ~~Thou art indeed just, Lord~~
23. ~~To seem the stranger lies my lot~~
24. ~~I wake and feel the fell of dark~~
25. ~~The Caged Skylark~~
26. In the Valley of the Elwy
27. ~~Brothers~~
28. ~~Peace~~
29. ~~Felix Randal~~
30. Ribblesdale
31. The fine delight that fathers thought

Gerard Hopkins was born July 28, 1844, to Manley and Catherine (Smith) Hopkins, the first of their nine children. His parents were [High Church Anglicans](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/denom1.html) (variously described as "earnest" and "moderate"), and his father, a marine insurance adjuster, had just published a volume of poetry the year before.

At grammar school in Highgate (1854-63), he won the poetry prize for "The Escorial" and a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford (1863-67), where his tutors included [Walter Pater](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/pater/index.html) and Benjamin Jowett. At one time he wanted to be a painter-poet like [D. G. Rossetti](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/index.html) (two of his brothers became professional painters), and he was strongly influenced by the aesthetic theories of Pater and [John Ruskin](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/ruskinov.html) and by the poetry of the devout Anglicans George Herbert and[Christina Rossetti.](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/crov.html) Even more insistent, however, was his search for a religion which could speak with true authority; at Oxford, he came under the influence of [John Henry Newman](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/jhnbio.html). (See [Tractarianism](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/tractarian.html).) Newman, who had converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism in 1845, provided him with the example he was seeking, and in 1866 he was received by Newman into the Catholic Church. In 1867 he won First-Class degrees in Classics and "Greats" (a rare "double-first") and was considered by Jowett to be the star of Balliol.

The following year he entered the Society of Jesus; and feeling that the practice of poetry was too individualistic and self-indulgent for a Jesuit priest committed to the deliberate sacrifice of personal ambition, he burned his early poems. Not until he studied the writings of Duns Scotus in 1872 did he decide that his poetry might not necessarily conflict with Jesuit principles. Scotus (1265-1308), a medieval Catholic thinker, argued (contrary to the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas) that individual and particular objects in this world were the only things that man could know directly, and then only through the haecceitas ("thisness") of each object. With his independently-arrived at idea of ["inscape"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins1.html) thus bolstered, Hopkins began writing again.

In 1874, studying theology in North Wales, he learned Welsh, and was later to adapt the rhythms of Welsh poetry to his own verse, inventing what he called "[sprung rhythm.](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins13.html)" The event that startled him into speech was the sinking of the *Deutschland*, whose passengers included five Catholic nuns exiled from Germany. *The Wreck of the Deutschland* is a tour de force containing most of the devices he had been working out in theory for the past few years, but was too radical in style to be printed.

From his ordination as a priest in 1877 until 1879, Hopkins served not too successfully as preacher or assistant to the parish priest in Sheffield, Oxford, and London; during the next three years he found stimulating but exhausting work as parish priest in the slums of three manufacturing cities, Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow. Late in 1881 he began ten months of spiritual study in London, and then for three years taught Latin and Greek at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire. His appointment in 1884 as Professor of Greek and Latin at University College, Dublin, which might be expected to be his happiest work, instead found him in prolonged depression. This resulted partly from the examination papers he had to read as Fellow in Classics for the Royal University of Ireland. The exams occured five or six times a year, might produce 500 papers, each one several pages of mostly uninspired student translations (in 1885 there were 631 failures to 1213 passes). More important, however, was his sense that his prayers no longer reached God; and this doubt produced the "terrible" sonnets. He refused to give way to his depression, however, and his last words as he lay dying of typhoid fever on June 8, 1889, were, "I am happy, so happy."

Apart from a few uncharacteristic poems scattered in periodicals, Hopkins was not published during his own lifetime. His good friend Robert Bridges (1844-1930), whom he met at Oxford and who became Poet Laureate in 1913, served as his literary caretaker: Hopkins sent him copies of his poems, and Bridges arranged for their publication in 1918.

Even after he started writing again in 1875, Hopkins put his responsibilities as a priest before his poetry, and consequently his output is rather slim and somewhat limited in range, especially in comparison to such major figures as[Tennyson](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/index.html) or [Browning](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html). Over the past few decades critics have awarded the third place in the Victorian Triumvirate first to Arnold and then to Hopkins; now his stock seems to be falling and [D.G. Rossetti](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/dgrov.html)'s rising. Putting Hopkins up with the other two great Victorian poets implies that his concern with the "[inscape](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins1.html)" of natural objects is centrally important to the period; and since that way of looking at the world is essentially Romantic, it further implies that the similarities between Romantic and Victorian poetry are much more significant than their differences. Whatever we decide Hopkins' poetic rank to be, his poetry will always be among the greatest poems of faith and doubt in the English language.

Although his early "Soliloquy of One of the Spies in the Wilderness" shows that Hopkins could write[dramatic monologues](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/dm1.html) in the manner of [Browning](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/rbov.html), [Tennyson](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/tennyov.html), and [Rossetti](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/dgrov.html), virtually all his extant poems take the form of highly condensed lyrics, usually experimental versions of the sonnet. His forms usually build to some sort of [epiphany,](http://www.victorianweb.org/technique/epiph.html)moment of vision, dramtic reversal — or all three. As ["God's Grandeur,"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins3.html) Pied Beauty," and ["The Windhover"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins10.html) all show, he chose forms that permitted (or forced) him to find ways of packing multiple meanings in a very brief scope. Elaborate word play or puns and [biblical allusion based on typology](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/type/ch6a.html) exemplify two of the ways he combined image with the structure of the sonnet.

Like [Ruskin](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/index.html) and [Browning](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/rbov.html), who were major influences, Hopkins employs allusions to [biblical types](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/type/typologyov.html)as a means of combining a rich, aesthetic surface with elaborate symbolism. As [Jerome Bump](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins6.html)has shown, Hopkins also draws on both medieval and Tractarian conceptions of typology that extend this kind of symbolism to include nature objects, such as the sun and seasons. A poem such as ["The Windhover"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins10.html) presents the sensuous, visible details of a really existing thing — here the hawk — and then makes us realize the elaborate Christian significance of each detail, as (like a type) the image of the bird is "completed" and makes sense only by reference to Christ.

Whereas "Barnfloor and Winepress" and "New Readings" make explicit reference to biblical types in the same way as do poems by Tennyson, Browning, and Christina Rossetti, ["The Windhover,"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins10.html) ["God's Grandeur,"](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/hopkins3.html) and other later works by Hopkins instead employ charactertically distant echoes of commonplace images. For example, the basic or generating conceit of "The Windhover" is that the higher beauty and higher victory come forth only when something — say, a hawk, an ember, or a clump of soil — is subjected to greater pressure and crushed or bruised. This conceit is in fact an extension of the standard typological interpretation of that passage in Genesis where God tells the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel" (3:15). According to conventional readings of this passage, Christ was the seed Who would bruise the serpent's head, and He in turn would be bruised — crucified — in thus conquering evil. James Finn Cotter has correctly pointed out that as a reader it was Hopkins's "custom to concentrate on an essential passage, gloss it exhaustively, and focus on a word or phrase that acted as a key to the whole scene or meaning of the author." The phrase, conceit, or basic structure that informs so many of his poems derives from Genesis 3:15 and can be stated in the following form: true beauty, true life, true victory can only be achieved, as Christ has shown, by being bruised and crushed. Stress, pressure, crushing, bruising, and similar terms appear as organizing ideas throughout his poetry, for here is a point at which Hopkins's basic beliefs, literary techniques, theological methods all converge.

Much of Hopkins's historical importance has to do with the changes he brought to the form of poetry, which ran contrary to conventional ideas of metre. Prior to Hopkins, most [Middle English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_English) and[Modern English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_English) poetry was based on a rhythmic structure inherited from the Norman side of English literary heritage. This structure is based on repeating groups of two or three syllables, with the stressed syllable falling in the same place on each repetition. Hopkins called this structure "running rhythm", and though he wrote some of his early verse in running rhythm he became fascinated with the older rhythmic structure of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, of which [*Beowulf*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf) is the most famous example. Hopkins called his own rhythmic structure [sprung rhythm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sprung_rhythm). Sprung rhythm is structured around feet with a variable number of syllables, generally between one and four syllables per foot, with the stress always falling on the first syllable in a foot. It is similar to the "rolling stresses" of [Robinson Jeffers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robinson_Jeffers), another poet who rejected conventional metre. Hopkins saw sprung rhythm as a way to escape the constraints of running rhythm, which he said inevitably pushed poetry written in it to become "same and tame." In this way, Hopkins can be seen as anticipating much of [free verse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_verse).

Gerard Manley Hopkins is one of the greatest 19th-century poets of religion, of nature, and of inner anguish. In his view of nature, the world is like a book written by God. In this book God expresses himself completely, and it is by “reading” the world that humans can approach God and learn about Him. Hopkins therefore sees the environmental crisis of the Victorian period as vitally linked to that era’s spiritual crisis, and many of his poems bemoan man’s indifference to the destruction of sacred natural and religious order. The poet harbored an acute interest in the scientific and technological advances of his day; he saw new discoveries (such as the new explanations for phenomena in electricity or astronomy) as further evidence of God’s deliberate hand, rather than as refutations of God’s existence.

One of Hopkins’s most famous (and most debated) theories centers on the concept of “inscape.” He coined this word to refer to the essential individuality of a thing, but with a focus not on its particularity or uniqueness, but rather on the unifying design that gives a thing its distinctive characteristics and relates it to its context. Hopkins was interested in the exquisite interrelation of the individual thing and the recurring pattern. He saw the world as a kind of network integrated by divine law and design.

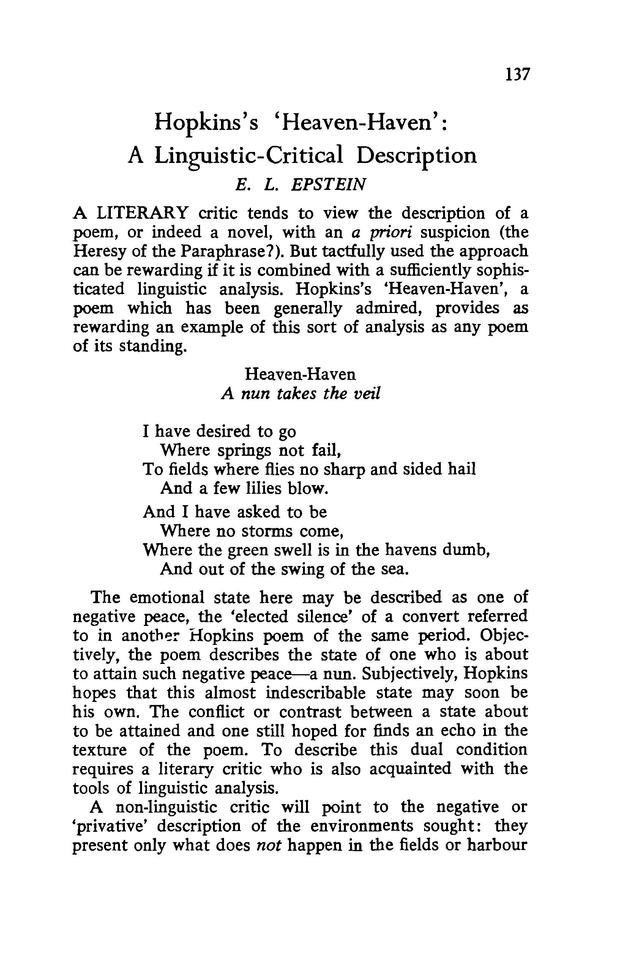
Hopkins wrote most frequently in the sonnet form. He generally preferred the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, which consists of an octave followed by a sestet, with a turn in argument or change in tone occurring in the second part. Hopkins typically uses the octave to present some account of personal or sensory experience and then employs the sestet for philosophical reflection. While Hopkins enjoyed the structure the sonnet form imposes, with its fixed length and rhyme scheme, he nevertheless constantly stretched and tested its limitations. One of his major innovations was a new metrical form, called “sprung rhythm.” In sprung rhythm, the poet counts the number of accented syllables in the line, but places no limit on the total number of syllables. As opposed to syllabic meters (such as the iambic), which count both stresses and syllables, this form allows for greater freedom in the position and proportion of stresses. Whereas English verse has traditionally alternated stressed and unstressed syllables with occasional variation, Hopkins was free to place multiple stressed syllables one after another (as in the line “All felled, felled, are all felled” from “Binsey Poplars”), or to run a large number of unstressed syllables together (as in “Finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy” from *Wreck of the Deutschland*). This gives Hopkins great control over the speed of his lines and their dramatic effects.

Another unusual poetic resource Hopkins favored is “consonant chiming,” a technique he learned from Welsh poetry. The technique involves elaborate use of alliteration and internal rhyme; in Hopkins’s hands this creates an unusual thickness and resonance. This close linking of words through sound and rhythm complements Hopkins’s themes of finding pattern and design everywhere. Hopkins’s form is also characterized by a stretching of the conventions of grammar and sentence structure, so that newcomers to his poetry must often strain to parse his sentences. Deciding which word in a given sentence is the verb, for example, can often involve significant interpretive work. In addition, Hopkins often invents words, and pulls his vocabulary freely from a number of different registers of diction. This leads to a surprising mix of neologisms and archaisms throughout his lines. Yet for all his innovation and disregard of convention, Hopkins’ goal was always to bring poetry closer to the character of natural, living speech.

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| **Heaven—Haven** |
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| *A nun takes the veil* |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | I HAVE desired to go |  | | Where springs not fail, |  | | To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail |  | | And a few lilies blow. |  | |  |  | | And I have asked to be | *5* | | Where no storms come, |  | | Where the green swell is in the havens dumb, |  | | And out of the swing of the sea. |  | |

The entire poem is an extended metaphor, a familiar, sensuous rendering of an unfamiliar and nonsensuous reality. The extraordinary power of the extended metaphor derives from the fact that the poet keeps attention focused on the particularities of storms and seasons while all the time referring beyond them to other things. But within the poem are also a multitude of discrete metaphors -- "sided hail," "green swell," "havens dumb," "swing of the sea" -- which complicate, intensify, and comment on the larger metaphor. Aristotle, as often, said it quite well: "a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarities in dissimilars." In Hopkins’ poem the whole complex of "a nun taking the veil" is seen as similar to the other complex of seasonal and natural phenomena; a dialectic between the familiar, the seasons and storms at sea, and the unfamiliar, "taking the veil," is set up in which each renews and deepens the meaning of the other. The metaphoric dialectic is a complex one: on the one hand, the familiar and sensuous is used to evoke the unfamiliar, and, on the other hand, the unfamiliar context or frame in which the familiar is set allows us to see the ordinary in a new way. That is to say, the nature imagery evokes "taking the veil," *and*that strange event serves as the frame for nature, causing us to see it now in a new light. Metaphoric insight never takes us "out of ourselves," but it returns us to ourselves with new insight; it is not a mystical, static, intellectual vision, but an insight into how ordinary human life and events can be made to move beyond themselves by connecting them to this and to that.



Take “heaven” and “haven” literally: the heavens are the skies, a haven is a sheltered port. The dash between the two suggests separation as much as linkage; are we moving from a heaven to a haven?

It seems there is a contrast. We can contrast “I have desired to go” with “I have asked to be,” and the imagery of the first stanza seems almost exclusively about the temperature and violence of the air, whereas the second stanza is about the temperament and violence of the sea. (I’m assuming a “spring” fails when it freezes or dries out).

But the “desire to go” sets up the eventual destination, whereas “asked to be” concerns the mode of transport. That crisscrossing – “desire” usually sets things in motion, “being” usually determines where something is at rest – alerts us that the relation isn’t as simple as contrast, even though there are points of contrast. The two stanzas are linked not just by the title, but also by the last line of the first stanza and the first line of the second:  
And a few lilies blow. / And I have asked to be

Lilies were preceded by “where springs not fail,” where water and life are eternal. Around the “springs” are “fields where flies no sharp and sided hail,” where physical pain and prejudice are gone. The good in this stanza is defined by what it is not: the “veil” is implicit in the description. But there is one thing that stands in these fields which need not be perfect: lilies. They are still moved by the wind.

In the next stanza, again, the good is mainly defined by what it is not: no storms come. But “the green swell is in the havens dumb” – the green swell is there, there is some battle between Chaos and Order, but our speaker is out of the “swing of the sea,” culminating in a third “And.” That last sentence is ambiguous: it could be that the “green swell” is out of the “swing of the sea,” that the haven entraps the wave.

Either way, the poem leaves us, in meditating on the vows one makes in choosing the religious life, with two things that our speaker cannot negate: the “lilies” and the “green swell.” Our speaker sees that they are inescapably connected with her “desiring” and “being:” being is conceived in some relation to change (“green swell”), and “desiring” brings up the question of what we ultimately desire, the escape from failure and death.

Our speaker does not want to negate these things, though: the lilies are the memories we have of the dead and that – we hope – they have of us. Where she desires to go, those memories are still moving. In where she asks to be, the “green swell” is sidestepped. Creation is occurring, still. She has to stand outside of it not because her vows make her automatically holy, but because of the tension between “desiring” and “asking.” What she wants is not hers to have. It can only be given, and she is therefore in the most vulnerable of situations. The prayer is serene because the trust is complete.

In Heaven-Haven, Hopkins not only prays for a day when he

can be free of the physical stresses of the world, but also

the emotional pains. Life is filled with turbulent storms

of anger and despair. Hopkins sees Heaven (death) as an

escape from the harsh "sharp and sided" reality of life.

Life to Hopkins is a sea. One moment a man is rich and

happy and the next fate has thrown him a curveball and sent

him to the poorhouse. There is no escaping the acrid

aspects of life, so Hopkins turns to death

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| **The Habit of Perfection** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | ELECTED Silence, sing to me |  | | And beat upon my whorlèd ear, |  | | Pipe me to pastures still and be |  | | The music that I care to hear. |  | |  |  | | Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb: | *5* | | It is the shut, the curfew sent |  | | From there where all surrenders come |  | | Which only makes you eloquent. |  | |  |  | | Be shellèd, eyes, with double dark |  | | And find the uncreated light: | *10* | | This ruck and reel which you remark |  | | Coils, keeps, and teases simple sight. |  | |  |  | | Palate, the hutch of tasty lust, |  | | Desire not to be rinsed with wine: |  | | The can must be so sweet, the crust | *15* | | So fresh that come in fasts divine! |  | |  |  | | Nostrils, your careless breath that spend |  | | Upon the stir and keep of pride, |  | | What relish shall the censers send |  | | Along the sanctuary side! | *20* | |  |  | | O feel-of-primrose hands, O feet |  | | That want the yield of plushy sward, |  | | But you shall walk the golden street |  | | And you unhouse and house the Lord. |  | |  |  | | And, Poverty, be thou the bride | *25* | | And now the marriage feast begun, |  | | And lily-coloured clothes provide |  | | Your spouse not laboured-at nor spun. |  | |

("golden street"-aisle leading to the alter "unhouse and house"-take the consecrated Host from the tabernacle and return it)

Hopkins' theme is that denying the senses can yield deeper, spiritual satisfactions. In each stanza, he addresses one of the senses, telling it what it must do without and what it will gain: music, speech, visual delights, taste, smells, touch. The seventh and final stanza sums up the renunciations in the metaphor of the ascetic's marriage to the bride of Poverty, suggesting, as well, yet another renunciation and its compensation. While readers enjoy the tightly knit structure of such a poem, however, they should also appreciate the fluidity of structure, its ability to surprise even as it satisfies expectation. In Robert Frost's excellent image, "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting."

Readers should also notice that plot, syntax, and argument, as well as devices like repetition, antithesis, reminiscences of familiar parallel works, and many other features work together to give a poem its structure. However spontaneous, a poem should never be mistaken for a a shapeless effusion or random outburst. All lasting poetry has structure of some sort that is related to its meaning, not just its sound.

In both “The Darkling Thrush” and “The habit of Perfection”, the two poems delve into the relationship between man and spirituality. In “The Darkling Thrush” Thomas Hardy explores the human capacity for hope and faith even in the face of pessimism. “The Habit of Perfection” in contrast delves more into how an individual can expand spiritually by reining in one’s fleshly appetites and selfish desires. Both explore the idea of divinity and enlightenment beyond a person’s scope. However, the two poems differ widely in their methods suggested for how a person does achieve or even relate to higher spirituality in the universe. For Hardy, the speaker of his poem comes from an apathetic, degenerating world who sees no reason for hope nor belief in God or the good, “All mankind that haunted nigh had sought their household fires, the lands sharp features seemed to me the Century’s corpse outleant…and every spirit upon earth seemed fervorless as I.”. In contrast, “The Habit of Perfection” sees the redemption of man’s soul and purpose in life inherent in the individual themselves, who must self-discipline themselves to find spiritual elevation. Written in the same period in Victorian society, these two poems are singular in their contrasting views for mankind’s abilities and place in the universe, as well as differing attitudes of optimism for the former. For “The Darkling Thrush”, the general point of pessimism with acknowledgement of man’s limitations in understanding the universe beyond him is delineated by imagery and structure. In “The Habit of Perfection”, the poem’s meaning of how a person can transcend their earthly limitations by ignoring earthly pleasures is enhanced by the poet’s use of personification and allusion.  
The use of imagery in “The Darkling Thrush” is key to its overall mood set throughout the poem. Repetition of the theme of death and degeneration is emphasized by the use of words such as the frost of the winter evening being “spectre-gray”, “The weakening eye of day”, and a whole stanza on the subject of “The lands sharp features seemed to me the Century’s corpse outleant, his crypt the cloudy canopy.” Such words and lines contribute to the first two stanzas pessimistic and contemplative mood, touched with melancholy that only the speaker gives voice to, but the whole world feels. “And every spirit upon earth seemed fervorless as I.” Other images used add to the depths of the speaker’s depression, such as the “household fires” that humans have retreated to, suggesting that man with their ambivalent ability to create and destroy have isolated themselves from the growing darkness of the world with artificial light. This suggest even further the isolation between man and the universe—the universe that includes divinity and the natural flow of life beyond human vanities and short-lived passions. But it is with the third and fourth stanza that the imagery employed changes from reminiscent of aging and death to hope and regeneration. With the use of the singing thrush, “A voice arose among in a full-hearted evensong of joy illimited, an aged thrush in blast-beruffled plume.” The song of the thrush is symbolic. Its symbolic of human hope, not only for better things in the physical world, but of humans and the natural universe—represented in the singing bird—having a truer relationship with each other, of when people can accept their fleshiness and their ultimate unimportance instead of gouging and shaping the earth with memorials to themselves and their selfishness. It also is a stand-in for spring, the season of hope and regeneration, for which the thrush is preparing for. The speaker, with the last line “So little cause for carolings of such ecstatic sound…that I could think there trembled through some blessed hope, of which he knew, and I was unaware.” is acknowledging that somewhere, there could be a higher purpose, a divinity, a higher state of human spirituality and enlightenment beyond his ken. Structure is also essential in delineating this change from matter of factual depression over the state of the world to hope for better things. The first two stanzas are quite structured and orderly, following a familiar rhythm throughout and written dispassionately. It is with the introduction of the bird that the stanzas rhythm and structure change drastically, the rhythm no longer it’s easy, familiar beat, but a rapid, emotional fluttering. The structure becomes more emotional in nature, with interjections added onto sentences and lines made shorter as the speaker is gripped with new feeling. The speaker, along with the thrush, ends the poem with hope, the eternal scourge and blessing of men.  
With “The Habit of perfection” the poet comes from a different spiritual place. The speaker is almost exuberant with hope and resolution in comparison to Hardy. He claims that with deprivation and self-discipline comes a greater understanding of the divine in the universe, and that such understanding brings joy to its believers. The poet, Gerard Hopkins, works with the underlying assumption that divinity does exist, that it does care for the growth of the human soul, and that man has the capacity to elicit positive change in their life and the world permanently. In short, he is emphasizing the power and importance of the individual, whose hard work and dedication ends in such delightful rewards such as being closer to God, as opposed to Hardy who finds the individual powerless in the face of the universe to ultimately change anything, spiritual or physical, their efforts meaningless and ultimately marred by their own arrogance of their importance, and any divinity to be uninterested in the doings of men. Hopkins emphasizes his optimism of human individuals and the benevolent universe they live in by use of personification. The senses and human desires he speaks to are treated as sentient, separate beings from him “Elected Silence”, “Nostrils, your careless breath that spends” and “O feet, that want the yield of plushy sward.” By doing so, Hopkins elevates the position of these senses, and by doing so, also elevates the human individual by making a person and their fleshy accompaniments almost like a club of enlightened, reasonable beings who can consult each other to achieve higher spiritual elevation. By personifying and addressing these senses that often lead a person astray from a spiritual path to God, he also separates the human soul from its fleshly limits, further emphasizing the importance of a human individual. By allusion to the Bible, mainly in the last stanza, Hopkins ends the conversation between the speaker and his fleshly senses with the final result of spiritual elevation that comes by depriving one’s fleshly desires and senses. It all culminates in a marriage between the individual and poverty, “lily colored clothes not labored at, nor spun”, which is a reference to the teaching of Jesus emphasizing how God takes care of his believers, the final word in Hopkins point of a benevolent universe with a benevolent God with important human individuals.  
In the end, both Hopkins and Hardy deal with spirituality being beyond human abilities, but they differ in the importance of the individual in finding this spiritual state, or even how advisable it is. Hopkins finds it the goal to aspire to in all humans, Hardy ends the poem ambivalently—it could be a true redemption, or yet another manifestation of human arrogance over its importance.

*Father Hopkins' poem, "The Habit of Perfection," dramatizes the importance of silencing and stilling each of the five senses in order to advance in the spiritual realm.*

The title, “[**The Habit of Perfection**](http://www.bartleby.com/122/3.html),” of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem features a pun on the term habit. As a monk, the poet has accepted the garb of the monastic, sometimes called a “habit.” Of course, the ordinary meaning of common routine also functions fully.

About the importance of silence, Paramahansa Yogananda has averred, “What joy awaits discovery in the silence behind the portals of your mind no human tongue can tell.” Jesuit Priest Gerard Manley Hopkins completely concurs with the great guru’s claim. Father Hopkins’ poem dramatizes the bliss of silence in seven rimed quatrains, each with the rime scheme, ABAB, featuring his famous sprung rhythm and inscape techniques.

The devotee/speaker commands each of his senses to cease their normal functioning, in order that his soul may meditate in holy silence and commune with the Divine.

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**First Quatrain: “Elected Silence, sing to me” - Silencing the Sense of Sound**

The speaker reveals himself to be a devotee on the spiritual path, as he converses with “Elected Silence”; the devotee chooses silence as the place where inner awareness starts, remembering the biblical injunction, “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10 King James Version)

The speaker metaphorically likens his “Elected Silence” to music, capable of singing to him and beating upon his eardrum. This silence “pipe[s him] to pastures” in the mind which he wants to “still.” He, therefore, asks silence to be the “music that [he cares] to hear.”

**Second Quatrain: “Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb”**

As an adjunct to the auditory sense, speaking or moving the lips must cease as well as catching sounds with the ear; thus, the speaker bids his lips to remain “lovely-dumb.” He tells his lips to form no sounds, stressing that the “eloquent” speech of the devotee is in his surrender to the Divine. The devotee must remain silent in order to hear the voice of Divinity.

READ THIS NEXT

* [**Gerard Manley Hopkins and His Poetry**](http://telasiado.suite101.com/gerard-manley-hopkins-and-his-poetry-a131888)
* [**Paramahansa Yogananda's Gita**](http://lindasuegrimes.suite101.com/paramahansa-yoganandas-gita-a48924)
* [**Yogananda's The Garden of the New Year**](http://lindasuegrimes.suite101.com/yoganandas-the-garden-of-the-new-year-a86725)

**Third Quatrain: “Be shellèd, eyes, with double dark” – Calming the Sense of Sight**

The speaker then bids his eyes remain closed. He commands them to seek “double dark” beyond which they can encounter “the uncreated light.” In their seeking, the eyes may experience flashes of unearthly light that “[c]oils, keeps, and teases simple sight.” But the devotee’s goal is to become so calm that the physical eyes cease to catch mere glimpses, while the spiritual eye becomes operational.

**Fourth Quatrain: “Palate, the hutch of tasty lust” – Calming the Sense of Taste**

The speaker/devotee orders his sense of taste to cease its intrusion upon the soul. He specifically commands his taste buds not to crave “wine.” The sense of taste must be subdued by fasting, wherein the urge for food and drink become swallowed up in the bliss of Divine communion.

**Fifth Quatrain: “Nostrils, your careless breath that spend” – Calming the Sense of Smell**

The sense of smell accompanies the act of breathing, and in meditation, breathing slows until it stops in deepest awareness of the Divine. The speaker commands his nose by asserting the premise that it functions through a sense of pride, which is damaging to the humbleness necessary for Divine awareness.

**Sixth Quatrain: “O feel-of-primrose hands, O feet” – Calming the Sense of Touch**

The speaker then promises his greedy hands and feet, which desire softness and comfort, that they will be rewarded to “walk the golden street,” if they cooperate in sacrificing their worldly comforts for heavenly ones.

**Seventh Quatrain: “And, Poverty, be thou the bride”**

In the final quatrain, the speaker alludes to Jesus’ command not to become overly conscious about one’s clothes: “And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” (Matthew 6:28-29 King James Version)

The speaker avers that taking “Poverty” as his bride, he will enjoy all the comforts of heaven. As a monastic, the speaker has taken a vow of poverty or simplicity, because he is seeking treasures not afforded by the material world. As he silences and calms all the senses, his true “marriage feast” begins, his marriage or union with the Divine, in Whom all worthwhile treasures are acquired and all worthy goals are achieved.

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| **God’s Grandeur** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God. |  | | It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; |  | | It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil |  | | Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod? |  | | Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; | *5* | | And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; |  | | And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil |  | | Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. |  | |  |  | | And for all this, nature is never spent; |  | | There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; | *10* | | And though the last lights off the black West went |  | | Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs— |  | | Because the Holy Ghost over the bent |  | | World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. |  | |  |  | |

#### Summary

The first four lines of the octave (the first eight-line stanza of an Italian sonnet) describe a natural world through which God’s presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flashes like the refracted glintings of light produced by metal foil when rumpled or quickly moved. Alternatively, God’s presence is a rich oil, a kind of sap that wells up “to a greatness” when tapped with a certain kind of patient pressure. Given these clear, strong proofs of God’s presence in the world, the poet asks how it is that humans fail to heed (“reck”) His divine authority (“his rod”).

The second quatrain within the octave describes the state of contemporary human life—the blind repetitiveness of human labor, and the sordidness and stain of “toil” and “trade.” The landscape in its natural state reflects God as its creator; but industry and the prioritization of the economic over the spiritual have transformed the landscape, and robbed humans of their sensitivity to the those few beauties of nature still left. The shoes people wear sever the physical connection between our feet and the earth they walk on, symbolizing an ever-increasing spiritual alienation from nature.

The sestet (the final six lines of the sonnet, enacting a turn or shift in argument) asserts that, in spite of the fallenness of Hopkins’s contemporary Victorian world, nature does not cease offering up its spiritual indices. Permeating the world is a deep “freshness” that testifies to the continual renewing power of God’s creation. This power of renewal is seen in the way morning always waits on the other side of dark night. The source of this constant regeneration is the grace of a God who “broods” over a seemingly lifeless world with the patient nurture of a mother hen. This final image is one of God guarding the potential of the world and containing within Himself the power and promise of rebirth. With the final exclamation (“ah! bright wings”) Hopkins suggests both an awed intuition of the beauty of God’s grace, and the joyful suddenness of a hatchling bird emerging out of God’s loving incubation.

#### Form

This poem is an Italian sonnet—it contains fourteen lines divided into an octave and a sestet, which are separated by a shift in the argumentative direction of the poem. The meter here is not the “sprung rhythm” for which Hopkins is so famous, but it does vary somewhat from the iambic pentameter lines of the conventional sonnet. For example, Hopkins follows stressed syllable with stressed syllable in the fourth line of the poem, bolstering the urgency of his question: “Why do men then now not reck his rod?” Similarly, in the next line, the heavy, falling rhythm of “have trod, have trod, have trod,” coming after the quick lilt of “generations,” recreates the sound of plodding footsteps in striking onomatopoeia.

#### Commentary

The poem begins with the surprising metaphor of God’s grandeur as an electric force. The figure suggests an undercurrent that is not always seen, but which builds up a tension or pressure that occasionally flashes out in ways that can be both brilliant and dangerous. The optical effect of “shook foil” is one example of this brilliancy. The image of the oil being pressed out of an olive represents another kind of richness, where saturation and built-up pressure eventually culminate in a salubrious overflow. The image of electricity makes a subtle return in the fourth line, where the “rod” of God’s punishing power calls to mind the lightning rod in which excess electricity in the atmosphere will occasionally “flame out.” Hopkins carefully chooses this complex of images to link the secular and scientific to mystery, divinity, and religious tradition. Electricity was an area of much scientific interest during Hopkins’s day, and is an example of a phenomenon that had long been taken as an indication of divine power but which was now explained in naturalistic, rational terms. Hopkins is defiantly affirmative in his assertion that God’s work is still to be seen in nature, if men will only concern themselves to look. Refusing to ignore the discoveries of modern science, he takes them as further evidence of God’s grandeur rather than a challenge to it. Hopkins’s awe at the optical effects of a piece of foil attributes revelatory power to a man-made object; gold-leaf foil had also been used in recent influential scientific experiments. The olive oil, on the other hand, is an ancient sacramental substance, used for centuries for food, medicine, lamplight, and religious purposes. This oil thus traditionally appears in all aspects of life, much as God suffuses all branches of the created universe. Moreover, the slowness of its oozing contrasts with the quick electric flash; the method of its extraction implies such spiritual qualities as patience and faith. (By including this description Hopkins may have been implicitly criticizing the violence and rapaciousness with which his contemporaries drilled petroleum oil to fuel industry.) Thus both the images of the foil and the olive oil bespeak an all-permeating divine presence that reveals itself in intermittent flashes or droplets of brilliance.

Hopkins’s question in the fourth line focuses his readers on the present historical moment; in considering why men are no longer God-fearing, the emphasis is on “now.” The answer is a complex one. The second quatrain contains an indictment of the way a culture’s neglect of God translates into a neglect of the environment. But it also suggests that the abuses of previous generations are partly to blame; they have soiled and “seared” our world, further hindering our ability to access the holy. Yet the sestet affirms that, in spite of the interdependent deterioration of human beings and the earth, God has not withdrawn from either. He possesses an infinite power of renewal, to which the regenerative natural cycles testify. The poem reflects Hopkins’s conviction that the physical world is like a book written by God, in which the attentive person can always detect signs of a benevolent authorship, and which can help mediate human beings’ contemplation of this Author.

Paraphrase

The world is filled with God’s glory, which will shine out and flare, like the brief but intense flashes of light given off by foil when one shakes it. God’s power grows and spreads everywhere. But then why do men not heed this power? Man has walked, worked, and left his mark on the world with his ideas, ruining nature. Trees are gone, in their stead buildings, and no longer does man have a connection with the earth and the ground; instead man wears shoes.

But even after all the trouble man has caused, Nature is not dead. All things still contain some of nature’s beauty. Even though the sun sets, it will come up in the morning in the East. God is still guarding over this world, even though man has strayed off the right path.

Description of Poetic Structure:³

"God's Grandeur" is a Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet:

one octave (8 lines) with end rhyme ABBAABBA. The octave's purpose is to present a problem or troubling situation. Hopkins first mentions the problem at the end of the first quatrain (four lines).

A sestet (6 lines) whose end rhyme is CDCDCD. The sestet begins the turn of the sonnet, or volta, in which the tone of the sonnet completely shifts. Sestets usually present solutions to the problems. In "God's Grandeur" Hopkins follows this pattern, and the turn makrs a clear change in the mood of the poem, revealing the optimism and belief that Hopkins felt.

Overall 14 lines with end rhyme.

Iambic Pentameter: five feet composed of unstressed/stressed syllables.

Description of Poetic Devices Used:

Inscape⁴: Once again Hopkins was influenced by reading Duns Scotus, and Hopkins combined his ideas with Scotus' to create what he called inscape, or the belief that all things are unique, and yet they are still interconnected in unifying patterns in the more complex web of life. Hopkins took this as further proof that God existed and was divine.

An example from the poem of this interconnectedness: Oil is crushed to show the power of God (line 3), but later in the poem man is ruining the Earth, especially during the Industrial Revolution, in which tons of coal were burned. Oil is mentioned twice, once directly and once implicitly, as well as once in a good light and once in a bad light.

Second example: At the beginning of the poem God's greatness is compared to electricity (lines 1-2); a different, subtler example of inscape is a reference to electricity in line 5, or the "rod" of God, which is comparable to a lightning rod and brings to minds Zeus's thunderbolts.⁵

Sprung Rhythm⁶: Hopkins is credited with the creation of this form of rhythm. Sprung Rhythm (opposite of running rhythm) has between one and four syllables per foot (instead of 2-3), with the stress always placed on the same syllable. It was also supposed to imitate the way humans naturally speak.

Similes: Line two: "Like shook foil"; Lines 3-4: "like the ooze of oil crushed."

Other comparisons: Lines 13-14 "the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings"; an interesting comparison that is almost a reverse personification, or giving the spirit of God animal characteristics.

Alliteration: Lines 10-12 " There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;- And though the last lights off the black West went- Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—" This is an interesting use of back to back alliteration.

Repetition: Line 5, "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod."

In-rhyme: Lines 6: "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil."; lines 6-7 rhyme of "wears" and "bare". This was another method that Hopkins used to maintain the interconnectedness of things in his poem.

Analysis:

In "God's Grandeur", Gerard Manley Hopkins skillfully uses images, similes, inscape, and sprung rhythm to convey a message of hope: while man is destroying the Earth, God and nature persevere and are always here to nurture us.

Hopkins begins the poem with an original and odd image: that of God's greatness charging the world, like an electric current that reveals itself in brief flashes of light (like shook foil (line 2)). Hopkins was a devout Catholic and Jesuit and here in the beginning of the poem his faith in God is evident. It is interesting to note that at times Hopkins became very depressed and felt like God abandoned him, contrary to the belief presented in this poem.

The use of another simile, "Like the ooze of oil crushed"(3-4) is an example of the interconnectedness of Hopkins' poems (inscape), because later on Hopkins mentions how the world was becoming smeared by man, and during the English Industrial revolution much oil was used, polluting the Earth. But, in this passage it is used to describe something good, and how God's grandeur oozes together and accumulates as oil does.

"Why do men now reck his rod?" (4) is a potentially confusing line. "Reck" is translated as "take heed of", and the rod can refer to God's power. It is also a historical symbol of Moses, who carried around a rod which God could used to demonstrate his power to the pharaoh, such as turning the rod into a serpent. This line does not convey an original idea, which is why do men disobey God, even though he is powerful and great? However, the language used to put forth this question is original.

The line “Generations have trod” (5) is repeated to give the reader the feeling and sound of how much time man has spent evolving and working to getting where he is now, which is not a good thing: Industrial Revolution England. The words “seared…bleared…smeared”(6) all summon negative connotations of dirty work that is hurting the Earth. Man has imposed himself everywhere onto the earth, has ripped out trees and put buildings in their stead. Hopkins clearly cared about nature and worried about the detrimental effects of the industrial revolution. Lastly, Hopkins has an interesting point to make about the connectedness of man and nature, which is still relevant today: How often does your bare foot touch the bare soil of the Earth? For most people, their daily routine is to get up, put on their shoes, drive to work, drive home, and take off their shoes- not once is there a sense of unity with the Earth, or even a reminiscence of how things were in the past. While the evolution of humans and their technology can be a positive thing, each generation can still learn from their predecessors, even those who wandered around barefoot and were still in touch with nature.

Finally Hopkins comes to the turn at the final six lines, or sestet. He wrote this poem in 1877, and had not plunged into depression too far as he ends on a very optimistic note. This section provides a large contrast to the earlier section of the poem (in which Hopkins also contrasted the glory of God and the dirtiness of man). How a poem ends determines the overall "feeling" that readers will take with them after reading, and Hopkins tries to convey the warm, fuzzy, feeling that he got when he thinks about the saving grace of God and the immortality of nature. The last line of the poem is yet another example of Hopkins' original comparisons; "the Holy ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings"(13-14) compares the holy ghost (and God) to a motherly bird that is protecting its young.

Unfortunately, Hopkins does not provide any solutions to the problem of man polluting and destroying nature. Instead, the end message is basically to have faith in God, and that he can fix it! Of course, Hopkins was confined to only 14 lines in this sonnet, but while the ending is supposed to make the reader feel warm, happy, and think "Oh, how nice, God's watching after us, it's okay...", it also conveys the message "Don't worry". This is troubling, because it can be taken as "Don't act", which is a trait seen in much of the younger generations of today.

Overall, Hopkins used very original images and similes to paint vivid pictures in readers' minds while conveying a message that has been often repeated, but whose importance is nonetheless still paramount.

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| **The Starlight Night** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | LOOK at the stars! look, look up at the skies! |  | | O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air! |  | | The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there! |  | | Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves’-eyes! |  | | The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies! | *5* | | Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare! |  | | Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!— |  | | Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize. |  | | Buy then! bid then!—What?—Prayer, patience, aims, vows. |  | | Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs! | *10* | | Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sallows! |  | | These are indeed the barn; withindoors house |  | | The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse |  | | Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows. |  | |  |  | |

## Welsh influences

The octave is densely packed with images. It has been suggested Hopkins was influenced by Welsh poetry:

* when he came to Wales, he started learning Welsh
* he later studied Welsh poetry, which is very patterned.

One of its devices is to describe something by heaping up a whole pile of images, often very opposite from each other. This is what Hopkins seems to be doing here.

## Stars

The initial images are personifications:

* the stars are ‘fire-folk’, with ‘elves’-eyes’, ‘flake doves’
* the clusters of stars remind him of little towns and ‘citadels’.

Then Hopkins inverts looking up to looking down, as down a well or mine:

* ‘delves’ is an archaic plural of ‘delf’, meaning a mine
* the stars up above seem like diamonds at the bottom of a mine-shaft.

Then he turns to the Milky Way and the sweep of diffuse starlight:

* he uses the image of trees, the whitebeam and the white poplar (‘abeles’), both of whose leaves show white when windblown.

In terms of his own poetic theory, Hopkins is creating the [inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape), the uniqueness of this particular sky scene.

## Commerce

The images gluing the octave and the sestet together are quite opposite, taken from the commercial world:

* purchase, prize from l.8 are linked to buy, bid (as at an auction) in l.9, echoing Jesus’ parables taken from the world of commerce:
  + the parable of buying the magnificent pearl by selling everything else ([Matthew 13:45](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/710#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations));
  + the field containing the hidden treasure ([Matthew 13:44](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/710#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)).

So such experiences of beauty are to be grabbed hold of as precious.

## Gathering natural beauty

The sestet also contains natural images of beauty

* the image of trees in blossom could be read as further [metaphors](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metaphors) of the stars; or they could be read as separate images altogether
* they lead up to the climactic image of the barn (see above). This is a man-made structure, though associated with pastoral imagery, set in parallel with ‘this piece-bright paling’, a man-made structure of enclosure
* the ‘shocks’ are the harvest sheaves of wheat gathered in, from the Bible reference. It might seem that what is gathered must be the experiences and memories of beauty that can be stored away; but that does not make sense with the last line, which suggests that what is stored away is a greater faith in Christ.

Beauty and faith are not the same, but nor are they different, either. Hopkins dwells on this in a further sonnet, ‘[The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741)’. In Hopkins’ theory, the sestet is defining the [instress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/instress), the particular way in which the scene impinges itself upon the poet, capturing its essence. The imagery of enclosure in ‘shuts’ is thus especially significant.

## The Second Coming

The reference to ‘the spouse / Christ’ comes from biblical imagery of [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ) as husband, or bridegroom, to the [church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/church), as in:

‘for the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready’ ([Revelation 19:7](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/710#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations))

And

‘I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.’ ([Revelation 21:2](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/710#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations))

The highly [symbolic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/symbolic) language refers to the teaching of the [Second Coming](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Second-Coming) of Christ. Associated with this, the church is often seen in Christian religious language as ‘the bride of Christ’. Indeed, traditionally, the [Old Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Old-Testament) book of The Song of Solomon, which is a love song, has been interpreted [allegorical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/allegorical)ly as an image of Christ and his bride, the church.

**Investigating The Starlight Night**

* What metaphors does Hopkins use to convey a sense of value?
* What is the effect of the image of ‘a farmyard scare’?
* Well, the first thing that strikes me is that the speaker here doesn't feel the way we do about the sky.  Instead of an infinite expanse of space, it's more like the upper storey of the world.  The stars, "the fire-folk," are not separated from us by an abyss-- they're almost our upstairs neighbors.  We're in an older cosmos, where nature is peopled through and through.   
    
  In harmony with this homier feeling about the universe are the *earthy*images used for the stars.  I can't decide whether lines 4 and 5 are describing starlight shining on the ground-- making woods and lawns look like diamond and gold mines-- or whether the sky itself looks like glimmering woods and lawns.  But either way, there's  a *mingling*of earth, air, and sky.  And then in line 7, the metaphor is even more earthy:  the shimmering of starlight is the motion of doves startled out of a farmyard.  The repeated "f" sounds even give us the fluttering sound they make.  
    
  The next line is a puzzling summary, one that seems obvious to the speaker but maybe not to us-- all this wealth of delight is a "purchase" and a "prize."  He doesn't stop to explain, but goes on to the next logical step:  who wouldn't give anything to possess this prize?  A life of austerity would not be too high a price. The argument has become more complex, but the imagery continues the same mingling of earth and sky:  now the stars look like cherry branches covered with blossoms-- "a May-mess," the meal produced by May.  For the next line I needed the dictionary; I think "mealed-with-yellow sallows" means willow trees whose bark is speckled as if sprinkled with yellow grain or flour.  Both lines suggest food-- connecting us back to the farmyard of the earlier line, and leading to the next strange image:  "These are indeed the barn; withindoors house/ the shocks."  With the dictionary's help I translated this as "Inside are housed the bundles of grain."  
    
  As the images become earthier, the meaning they carry becomes higher:  the barn is heaven where Christ dwells eternally.  When we see the beauty of the stars (which seems to contain all the earth's beauty as well) we are only seeing the outside of this barn.  On the other side of this "piece-bright paling"-- this shining fence or wall-- is the real wealth.  And of course to get to the other side would be to die, or die to self with "prayer, patience, alms, vows."  Hopkins seems to have parables of the kingdom in mind-- the pearl of great price, the wheat separated from weeds and gathered into the barn.  To lose everything is finally to gain eveything; if we are cut down and bundled up like wheat, we will also be gaining the harvest, which is Christ himself-- Christ joined together with all the saints.  Together with Christ we will both be the harvest and gain the harvest.   
    
  It's quite a leap, isn't it?  From star-gazing to the entire Christian vision.  But all held together by this moment of insight, this sudden burst of metaphor.

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| **Spring** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | NOTHING is so beautiful as spring— |  | | When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush; |  | | Thrush’s eggs look little low heavens, and thrush |  | | Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring |  | | The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing; | *5* | | The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush |  | | The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush |  | | With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling. |  | |  |  | | What is all this juice and all this joy? |  | | A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning | *10* | | In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy, |  | | Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning, |  | | Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy, |  | | Most, O maid’s child, thy choice and worthy the winning. |  | |

**Relevant Background**

* Hopkins was a priest who wrote Nature Poetry.
* He celebrated beauty in the natural world. He loved the freshness of spring.
* In many of his poems, like ‘Spring’, he linked beauty in nature to prayer.
* He thought that beauty in nature was a reminder of God’s love and greatness.
* He thought that beauty in nature was a reminder of the innocence and purity of childhood.
* He wrote this poem more than a hundred years ago.
* Hopkins wrote in a beautiful style that was sometimes difficult. He liked to express his feelings and views in new ways. He left out words such as ‘like’ in line three and changed the normal word order like in line eight.
* He often used striking and dramatic comparisons like in line three.
* Hopkins put a lot of sound effects into his poetry.
* He wrote many of his poems in the sonnet form.
* He enjoyed the unique shape, colours, beauty and inner energy of nature

**Summary**

**‘Spring’ i**s a sonnet. A sonnet is a rhyming fourteen-line poem. The poem is divided into two clearly different parts. The first part, of eight lines, is known as the octave. The second part, of six lines, is known as the sestet.

‘Nothing is so beautiful as spring’ is the first line of the poem.  
This line clearly summarises the meaning of the first eight lines or octave of the poem ‘Spring’. A lot of this part of the poem, the octave, is easier to understand than the sestet. In the octave, Hopkins mentions many of the details of spring that impress him. He gives a series of images one after the other that are typical of the season of spring.  
In the second line he pictures fresh weeds growing through a wheel in a yard.  
In the third line he praises the speckled colours on a thrushes’ egg.  
In the fourth and fifth lines he shows his delight at the wonderful sound of the thrushes song in the woods and compares its effect to lightning.  
In the sixth line he portrays the shiny leaves and blossoms of the pear-tree.  
In the seventh line he describes the fast moving and richly coloured blue sky.  
In the eighth line he shows his delight at the playful lambs.

In the sestet, the last six lines, Hopkins looks for the real meaning that lies behind the happiness and energy of nature in springtime. Therefore the sestet develops the thought of the poem. It looks for the meaning behind the beauty. Hopkins finds that nature’s beauty reflects God’s perfect beauty. He then expresses a wish to shelter the beauty and innocence of childhood from sin.

In line nine Hopkins asks the following basic question:  
‘What is all this juice and all this joy?’  
In line ten, Hopkins quickly answers that it all goes back to the Garden of Eden from the bible. As a priest he believes in the stories of the bible. Spring is like an echo or a reminder of Paradise.  
In line eleven he begins a prayer. He prays God will preserve beauty before it loses its wholesomeness or purity.  
In line twelve he appeals to Christ and asks him to protect beauty from sin.  
In line thirteen he identifies the aspect of beauty he most wishes to see preserved. He is referring to childhood innocence. He obviously sees this as the springtime or ‘Mayday’ of human life.  
In line fourteen he appeals to Jesus as the child of Mary to win innocent children to his side and save them from sin.  
This is unusual because normally people who pray to Jesus want to be cleansed of sin after it happens. Jesus is normally the saviour of sinners. Hopkins wants Jesus to save the innocent.  
Overall it seems Hopkins changes the subject of the octave, nature, and introduces a new subject, religion, in the sestet.

**Themes**

Hopkins praises the beauty of nature in springtime:  
‘Nothing is so beautiful as spring’. He calls it ‘all this juice and all this joy’.

Hopkins celebrates energy in the natural world:  
‘weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush’. Note how the **‘w’** and **‘l’** sounds are musical and add to the feeling of energy.

Hopkins celebrates colour in the natural world:  
‘that blue is all in a rush with richness’. Note how the repeated **‘r’** sound deepens the meaning.

Hopkins regards nature’s beauty as a memory of Paradise:  
‘ A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden’

Hopkins feels despair at the way maturity spoils childhood innocence:  
‘sour with sinning’. He worries for the future of innocent minds. He tells Jesus to preserve children’s perfect innocence.

**Tones**

In the octave and the tone is happy and full of celebration:  
‘Nothing is so beautiful as spring’

In line nine the tone is questioning:  
‘What is all this juice and all this joy?’

Sometimes, also as in line nine, the tone is full of energy:  
‘What is all this juice and all this joy?’

In the sestet the tone changes and becomes urgent and anxious:  
‘Have, get, before it cloy, before it cloud’

In the sestet there is also a tone of regret that contrasts with the joy of the octave:  
‘Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning’

In the sestet the tone is pleading:  
‘Have, get’

In the sestet the tone is prayerful:  
‘Most, O maid's child, thy choice’

**Imagery**

Hopkins uses many comparisons:  
He compares the ‘eggs of a thrush’ to the speckled and cloud patterned sky. This is a simile, with the word ‘like’ omitted. He compares the song of the thrush to lightning, another simile. He compares springtime to the Garden of Eden from the bible. This comparison is a metaphor. Notice how he compares the pear tree in the distance to a paintbrush colouring the sky, another metaphor.

Note how Hopkins uses contrast, especially between sinning and innocence. The whole poem contains a contrast between the joyful octave praising nature and the anxious sestet worried about sin and praying to God.

He uses images to capture beauty and energy:  
‘What is all this juice and all this joy?’ and ‘weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush’ [these all have an appealing sound due to alliteration]. Find more yourself.

Hopkins uses various images of nature as examples of the beauty of spring:  
‘weeds’, ‘eggs’, ‘thrush’, ‘lambs’ and ‘peartree’.

Hopkins uses images from the bible:  
‘in the beginning in Eden garden’

The final image is an image of a prayer as Hopkins pleads to Jesus to preserve innocence:  
‘Most, O maid's child, thy choice’.

**Sound effects**

**Alliteration** [the repetition of first letters].  
Note the ‘j’ as follows:  
‘juice and all this joy’; and ‘l’ sounds in ‘look little low heavens’ and ‘like lightnings’

**Assonance** [repetition of vowels]:  
Note the **‘i’/‘ea’** sounds in ‘rinse and wring the ear, it’. Note also the long ‘**ai’/’ea**’ of ‘strain’ and ‘earth’ at the start of line ten:  
‘A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning’.  
Note also the long and musical **‘e’** sounds that are repeated in ‘sweet’, ‘being’ and ‘beginning’ in the second half of this line.

**Rhyming:**  
There is a strong rhyming pattern. There are only three different ending sounds in the entire poem. This makes the poem very musical.  
The **‘ing’** and ‘**ush’** sounds are repeated at the end of various lines in the octave in the pattern: **abbaabba**  
Likewise **‘oy**’ and **‘ing**’ form a pattern in the sestet: cbcbcb

**Internal Rhyme** [rhyming inside one line]:  
‘thrush’ is repeated in line three. The ‘ing’ sound is repeated internally in many of the lines that end in the ‘ing’ sound. An example of this is ‘racing’ and ‘fling’ in line eight.  
Can you count the number of times ‘ing’ is used in the poem? Did you get thirteen? Isn’t this a very musical effect?

Symbol Analysis

Put in a simple (and kind of boring) way, the goal of the first stanza is to prove that "Nothing is so beautiful as spring." But the descriptions of nature in spring also make some subtler claims, among which are: the idea of harmony between man and nature, the way nature can provide a connection between heaven and earth, and the powerful effect spring's beauty can have on people.

* Line 2: The image of "weeds, in wheels" is pretty. But also – because weeds are part of the natural world, while wheels are man-made – by putting the two together, the image becomes a **symbol** for a harmony of man and nature.
* Line 3: "Thrush's eggs look little low heavens" is a modified**simile** that connects the idea of heaven to earthly things – specifically these tiny bird eggs. We say "modified simile" because the "like" has been left out. It's not quite a metaphor, because it doesn't say the eggs *are* little low heavens, but taking out the "like" does nudge it in that direction a little bit.
* Lines 4-5: The powerful effect of the thrush song, which "does so rinse and wring / the ear," is told to us through**synecdoche**. The ear is used as a stand-in for the person, in his or her entirety, who is listening.
* Line 5: When we're told, still talking about the thrush, that "it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing" we have a **simile**built into a **metaphor**. Because the sound doesn't literally strike a person (unless our speaker is talking about sound waves, which we doubt) then "strike" is a sort of implied metaphor, turning the sound into something so physical it can be felt as a strike. But then we have the feeling of that strike further elaborated by the simile of "like lightnings."

There's no doubt that our speaker is Christian, and is deeply concerned with questions stemming from Christian theology. The Christian belief in the Garden of Eden and Christ's resurrection shape the way our speaker perceives the world, and the poem can largely be read as a prayer (an emotionally complex one, at that), beginning with praise, turning to a plea and source of concern, and finally acknowledging God's dominion.

* Line 8: The "racing lambs" are an image that is part of the scene our speaker is giving us. They contribute a sense of youthfulness, playfulness, and joy; I mean, come on, they are little baby sheep, running around! They are also (probably because of how cute and playful they are) a pretty widely recognized **symbol** of innocence. They help confirm how we are to view this scene of spring, and prepare us for the reference to the biblical Garden of Eden (the time before sin, when all was innocent).
* Lines 10-11: The story of Adam and Eve is the first explicit biblical **allusion** we get in the poem. And not only does alluding to this story help us understand how our speaker sees the spring scene he's been describing, but it also sets us up for what's to come. Because the allusion to Eden calls to mind the whole story, including original sin and the expulsion from Eden, we are prepared for the upcoming focus on sin. So we see that this allusion to Eden helps our speaker convey a lot in a pretty small space – a definite plus when you are writing a sonnet (and generally a good idea in any poem).
* Lines 11-12: When our speaker addresses Christ, we can definitely think of this poem as a prayer. A prayer, though, is essentially an **apostrophe**, since our speaker is addressing an abstract being.
* Lines 11-12: We also get a bit of **anaphora**, when our speaker repeats the phrase "before it" in two successive clauses. It's not only pleasing to the ear, but it helps get across the emotional state of our speaker. We hear him repeating this plea to Christ, and only slightly revising the word he uses to describe the ruining of the innocent mind. The fact that he lingers on it tells us that he's fairly obsessed and concerned. He's also speaking so urgently that sometimes he gets a little ahead of himself and has to go back to get the right word.

Aside from the end-rhymes, there's a lot of other music being made in the poem. Assonance and consonance help make sound connections between words and images, and make the language lively and musical. Alliteration, one type of consonance, is so common in this poem, we decided not to even go there (just look at line 2: When/weeds/wheels and long/lovely/lush) Instead, we thought we'd point out some of the other instances of consonance (along with some of assonance).  
  
**Consonance**:

* Line 1: is/as/spring. Notice how the *s*-sound in "as" rolls right into the s at the beginning of "spring."
* Line 2: wheels/long. Just as the image in this line provides a connection between the man-made wheel and the long weeds, the *l*-sound is makes a linguistic connection between the two.
* Line 11: get/it.
* Line 12: cloud/lord.
* Line 14: thy/worthy/the.

**Assonance**:

* Line 2: weeds/wheels. This time it's the *ee*-sound we're looking at.
* Line 4: echoes/so. This is actually a double whammy too. The *o*-sound makes assonance, while the *s*-sound makes consonance.
* Line 5: strikes/like/lightnings.
* Line 6: glassy/peartree/leaves. That *ee*-sound again.
* Line 10: sweet/being. And again!

# Spring Theme of Awe and Amazement

"Spring," for its first eight lines at least, is a praise-poem. Our speaker celebrates the beauty of nature and the profound effects it can have on man. The act of paying close attention to the natural world, and then allowing it to fill him with awe, seems to be of great importance to the speaker of this poem. The celebration of beauty is also closely linked with his contemplation of theology and the act of prayer.

## Questions About Awe and Amazement

1. Why does our speaker choose these specific aspects of nature to praise? Is there something essential about them, or would almost any natural image or sound be as effective?
2. Why does our speaker feel moved to praise the world around him? What does the act of praising mean to him?
3. What is the relationship between the speaker's praise for the natural world and the more direct communication with God in his prayer, by the end of the poem?

## Chew on This

Try on an opinion or two, start a debate, or play the devil’s advocate.

Because the speaker's praise seems to be based on the fact that spring resembles the Garden of Eden and the what Christianity considers the original relationship between man and nature, the praise in this poem is really a lament for the fall of man and the fact that the initial perfection of Eden could not be maintained.

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| Nothing is so beautiful as spring – (line 1) |

Notice how the speaker repeats the word "spring" even though it was just given in the title. It seems offhand, but it also makes us think a little harder about all the connotations of spring, particularly in the Christian religion: renewal and re-creation, Easter, and the resurrection of Christ.

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| When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush; (line 2) |

This line tells us of the speaker's deep delight in the shapes and growths of spring.

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| it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing (line 5) |

Our speaker has a keen eye and ear, and an ability to be awed by things that many of us might be too distracted to even notice. (If you want to hear the thrush's song, [click here](http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/s/songthrush/index.asp).)

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| that blue is all in a rush With richness; (lines 7-8) |

The sky is personified here, and it's as if it just can't hurry down fast enough to share its beauty. This makes the beauty sound like a gift ("richness") being given from up above, to man here on earth. Behind this line (and many others) seems to be an unspoken thanks for all the beauty that is so freely available.

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| Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, (line 3) |

Notice how Hopkins uses the word "heaven" in this description. As the poem progresses, we come to see that this connection between heaven and earth (the availability of the heavenly on earth) is very important.

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| […] they brush The descending blue; (line 6-7) |

The word "brush" calls to mind a paintbrush, and suggests the idea of a creator who made the world, as a painter creates a painting.

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| […] the racing lambs (line 8) |

Just like the word "heavens," this allusion to something biblical is slipped in here. And were it not for the explicit references to the Garden of Eden and Christ later, we might have just thought the lambs are part of the scene, maybe adding a connotation of innocence. But we see later that the Christian connotations are deeply important: Christ as Lamb of God and Christians as sheep in God's flock.

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| A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning In Eden garden – (lines 10-11) |

Here we see that, as beautiful and joyous as spring is, it also serves as a reminder of what was lost when man was expelled from Eden. It also implies what will be lost, as the seasons change, and as the innocent kids grow up.

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| Before it cloud, Christ, lord, (line 12) |

Here the poem turns into a prayer, directly addressed to Christ. It seems that the culmination of all the speaker's attention to the natural world and contemplation of Christian teachings is in a prayer, a direct communication with God.

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| O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning. (line 14) |

Through this prayer, and the acknowledgment that it is God's choice, our speaker seems to return a little to the praise and triumph of the earlier lines.

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| When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush; (line 2) |

Bringing natural ("weeds") and man-made ("wheels") imagery together sets up a subtle sense of harmony between man and nature.

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| thrush Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring (lines 3-4) |

The connection between the sound that a thrush makes and this feeling of spiritual cleansing says a lot about how the relationship between man and nature can bring man closer to a heavenly ideal. (If you want to hear the thrush's song, [click here](http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/s/songthrush/index.asp).)

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| it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing; (line 5) |

Hearing a thrush sing is like being struck from above. A connection between heaven and earth is made here, with the power of the heavens being felt and expressed through nature.

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| What is all this juice and all this joy? (line 9) |

Our speaker doesn't believe the natural world is something humans should just look at and say "Ooh, how pretty" and move on. Yes, it should be enjoyed and celebrated, but here he tells us that it should also be contemplated. Not only should we observe closely, but we also ought to think about what we observe and how that relates to the world (which, in our speaker's, case has a lot to do with his Christian beliefs).

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| "Spring" (title) |

Already, the title has set us up with ideas of innocence. We hear spring and we think of new life: flowers and baby birds and first love. (OK, maybe that last one is just us.)

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| does so rinse and wring The ear, (lines 4-5) |

This rinsing and wringing, this making clean, also suggests innocence to us. Think about it: generally we associate sin with being dirty, and innocence with being pure and clean.

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| the racing lambs (line 8) |

What's more innocent than a frolicking lamb? Their presence is like the final stamp on this scene that tells us: Certified Innocent.

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| A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning In Eden garden – (lines 10-11) |

The biblical story of the Garden of Eden is all about the loss of that original, ideal relationship between man, the rest of creation, and God. Innocence, for our speaker, is intricately bound up with his relationship with his creator and with the rest of creation.

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| Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning, Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy, (lines 12-13) |

The speaker gets explicit about his concerns. He thinks it would be great if we didn't have to leave the innocence of childhood.

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| **The Lantern out of Doors** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | SOMETIMES a lantern moves along the night, |  | | That interests our eyes. And who goes there? |  | | I think; where from and bound, I wonder, where, |  | | With, all down darkness wide, his wading light? |  | |  |  | | Men go by me whom either beauty bright | *5* | | In mould or mind or what not else makes rare: |  | | They rain against our much-thick and marsh air |  | | Rich beams, till death or distance buys them quite. |  | |  |  | | Death or distance soon consumes them: wind |  | | What most I may eye after, be in at the end | *10* | | I cannot, and out of sight is out of mind. |  | |  |  | | Christ minds: Christ’s interest, what to avow or amend |  | | There, éyes them, heart wánts, care haúnts, foot fóllows kínd, |  | | Their ránsom, théir rescue, ánd first, fást, last friénd. |  | |

We think we love, but how slow and lukewarm our hearts are! How fortunate that salvation depends not on our love, but on God’s. Hopkins seems to have been as naturally curious about other people as anyone alive, but he is honest about how far this love of neighbor takes him:  not far.

Many a man would not travel with the lantern carrier to the end of the first stanza. But we are each of us that lantern carrier, traveling the darkness alone. And more: we are that darkness, too. For the physical or intellectual beauty of a man has to fight its way to us: it has to “rain” “rich beams” “against our much-thick and marsh air.” Then we notice him, we of the dismal marsh: a beautiful man with a lantern, going somewhere.

Where does he go? The way of all flesh. He fades into death or, what serves as well for the speaker, into distance. With that, the speaker loses all interest. The metaphor is financial as well as psychological. Death or distance buys up everything we have invested, and then “out of sight is out of mind.” **Thus Hopkins says, with sadness, that even friendship is little more than the flickering interest kindled in us by a lantern swinging in the hand of a night traveler.**

No, we do not know love from ourselves. That is the affront Christianity delivers to the sentimentalists who divorce the dignity of man from God. **The sentimentalist will make a god out of love; Christianity asserts that you do not even know what love is unless in some fashion you know God, for it is God who is love, the Creator and no other.**He chose us that we might choose him. We do not say he is our friend, deriving the image by analogy from human friendship. Rather we say that **all human friendship is the far and shadowy reflection of God’s true love for us.**

For here in a world of night foundered wayfarers, there is yet one who seeks us out. **We may “wind our eye after” someone in whom we are interested, but we do not follow. Christ follows.** **Moving among us mind-misted people of the marsh, who half forget even as we begin to love, is one who not only remembers, but who loves and amends what he sees.**

**We think we enjoy fellowship, says Hopkins, but that is but an interruption of our solitude**. Yet in the same solitude, unseen by us and unsuspected, walks Christ. His interest does not flag, because His is the creature, as His are the winnings. He buys us back from death and distance; He loses, so to speak, that He may win. He alone is our “ransom” and “rescue.” **In the beginning, now, and evermore, Christ is ours before we know we are His, closer to us than we are to ourselves, our “first, fast, last friend.”**

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| **The Candle Indoors** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | SOME candle clear burns somewhere I come by. |  | | I muse at how its being puts blissful back |  | | With yellowy moisture mild night’s blear-all black, |  | | Or to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye. |  | | By that window what task what fingers ply, | *5* | | I plod wondering, a-wanting, just for lack |  | | Of answer the eagerer a-wanting Jessy or Jack |  | | There  God to aggrándise, God to glorify.— |  | |  |  | | Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire |  | | Mend first and vital candle in close heart’s vault: | *10* | | You there are master, do your own desire; |  | | What hinders? Are you beam-blind, yet to a fault |  | | In a neighbour deft-handed? Are you that liar |  | | And, cast by conscience out, spendsavour salt? |  | |

in Hopkins' The Candle Indoors, we are unsure

as to exactly who this voice is addressing, who it is that is bid to "come home", and in this

respect we can mark a resemblance to the Victorian form of dramatic monologue as used by

Browning and Tennyson. As the editor of the selection of Hopkins' poems in The Norton

Anthology writes, "Like the mad speakers of so many Victorian dramatic monologues, he

cannot escape a world solely of his own imagining"

"What hinders?" is the question that Hopkins asks of himself and of others in The Candle

Indoors. Why is it that he "plod[s] wondering" about the faith of others, what stops him from

coming "indoors", from coming "home"? We can observe a displacement, a projection of

Hopkins' anxieties about his own faith onto the universalised "Jessy or Jack" whom he

imagines in an anonymous "window". When he enunciates "come you indoors, come home;

your fading fire / Mend first", it is ambiguous as to whether Hopkins is telling himself to

resolve his "fading fire" of guttering faith, or whether he is imploring the declining

congregations of the age to return to church. In his own life, Hopkins seems to anticipate his

Tertianship - the time two years from now when he will retreat from this outside existence,

this plodding of the night, to devote himself "once more to a secluded life of prayer,

meditation and reconsideration of the ideals of the Society". A key part of the St. Ignatian

programme, the Tertianship served as a time of reflection for the Jesuit priest upon the

"several years of study or of active ministry" which Hopkins was here carrying out until 1881. This forthcoming seclusion is suggested by the words "Come you indoors, come home;

your fading fire / Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault". In this light, "what

hinders" is his creeping doubts, he cannot "come home" on this night or in his religious

discipline until he has resolved the insecurity which has him "cast by conscience out".

Although in this poem there is none of that glorifying lyricism of the natural world so widely

celebrated in Hopkins' early work - no depictions of a natural order bathed in flaming glory

which implicitly sings praises to God, Hopkins yet still retains his evangelical tone.

Structurally Hopkins uses the sonnet form to break the poem up into two parts. The first 8 lines deal with the wanderings of a faithless person looking into a house from outside. The last six lines ask the person to come indoors, ‘come home’

The first stanza deals with a wanderer seeing a candle burning in a window. How does this make the wanderer feel?’

It creates a positive feeling that the light from the candle keeps away the darkness of the night: ‘how its being puts blissful back with yellowy moisture mid night’s blear all black’

The fourth line means The light is seen through squinting eyes, where eyelashes form delicate streams of light the "tender trambeams" which can be read as making the simple candle with a seem holy and special.

How does the writer feel about the light from the candle? He is not happy, wanting some clearer answer and purpose for the candle ‘what task what fingers ply.’ He plods ‘wondering, a-wanting’ an answer. He wants the "task" of the owners of the candle to be God's work ("there/God to agrandise, God to glorify") so that the simple flame can truly represent an "answer" and end his wandering.

What changes in the second stanza? There seems to be a sense of accusation or questioning ‘what hinders? Are you beam-blind, yet to a fault in a neighbour deft-handed? Are you that liar and, cast by conscience out, spendsaviour salt’?

This could be addressed to god, it could be read as the thoughts of the same speaker in the octet (the opening eight lines), who is addressing God in a very bitter voice. In this case the speaker would be seeking God to mend the speaker's fading faith, where the "indoors" would be his own internal self. In the last 3 lines the speaker could be addressing God in angered tones with brash sounding consonants, emphasising his unhappiness such as ‘beam blind’ which has harsh, angry alliteration.

What does this poem have to do with home? Home can mean many things, from a place someone lives to their own selves and feelings. The body is the home of the mind and soul and perhaps here the two mix together. The feelings about God and religion link to the place that the poet lives in as well as their own body as a home.

Nonetheless, it bleakly explores one of Hopkins' major themes: the inability to take up faith. Structurally Hopkins uses the sonnet form to break the poem up into two parts, which focuses this theme especially well. The octet relates the thoughts of the faithless wanderer, who, seeing the candle in the window, recognizes its power to dispel the darkness. In the fourth line the light is seen through squinting eyes, where eyelashes form delicate streams of light the "tender trambeams" which can be read as imbuing the simple candle with a hallowed effect. But the speaker cannot take comfort in the simple light alone, for he wants the the "task" of the owners of the candle to be God's work ("there/God to agrandise, God to glorify") so that the simple flame can truly represent an "answer" and end his wandering.

Some candle clear burns somewhere I come by.   
I muse at how its being puts blissful back  
With yellowy moisture mild bight's blear-all black  
Or to-fro tender trambeams truckle at the eye.

By that window what task what fingers ply,  
I plod wondering a-wanting just for lack   
Of answer the eagerer a-wanting Jessy or Jack  
There/ God to aggrandise, God to glorify. —

In answer, the sextet seems to pose a challenge to the speaker of the octet, asking "what hinders?" him and commanding him "to come indoors." Is this actually the same speaker or some other figure who asks him to come indoors? I found myself thinking of the sextet as a plea to the speaker of the octet, willing him to mend his "fading fire" and "vital candle in close heart's vault" — to take strength from the candle.

Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire   
Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault;  
You there are master, do you own desire;

What hinders? Are you beam-blind, yet to a fault  
In a neighbour deft-handed? Are you that liar  
And, cast by conscience out, spendsavour salt.

Yet I found myself stumbling in the fourth stanza. The tone here, with the short concise feet and the pouncing rhythm, seems to be cynical and negative. There are the accusations of being "beam-blind" and a "liar", that the figure is out in the darkness due to his own guilty conscience. Is this speaker accusing the figure in the octet of being tied up in matters of the flesh by using the phrase "spendsavour salt"? Is "spendsavour" a verb here? If the sextet is indeed addressing the speaker of the octet, then who would be the speaker here?

As I reread the sextet yet again, I found myself thinking that perhaps, it could be read as the thoughts of the same speaker in the octet, who is addressing God in a very bitter voice. In this case the speaker would be seeking God to mend the speaker's fading faith in the third stanza, where the "indoors" would be his own internality. Then in the fourth stanza the speaker would be addressing God in angered tones with brash sounding consonants. What would it mean though to call God a liar in this situation? How would God "spendsavour salt"?

In reading this poem, I found it interesting to compare it to "The Lantern out of Doors" (40), which serves as a companion to it, and is from the view of a faithful speaker who watches from an interior as a bleak figure passes by in the dark who "death and distance soon consumes." But this speaker also says, in Hopkins' characteristically layered and compounded manner, that Christ is the keeper of men like this. He affirms that Christ is "their ransom, their rescue, and first, fast, last friend." (line 14). Does this contrast of warm tones to the cynicism of "The Candle Indoors" give a different meaning to the poem? Can we shape the speaker in "The Candle Indoors" in a more concise way after looking at this companion piece?

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| **The Sea and the Skylark** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | ON ear and ear two noises too old to end |  | | Trench—right, the tide that ramps against the shore; |  | | With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar, |  | | Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend. |  | |  |  | | Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend, | *5* | | His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinèd score |  | | In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour |  | | And pelt music, till none ’s to spill nor spend. |  | |  |  | | How these two shame this shallow and frail town! |  | | How ring right out our sordid turbid time, | *10* | | Being pure! We, life’s pride and cared-for crown, |  | |  |  | | Have lost that cheer and charm of earth’s past prime: |  | | Our make and making break, are breaking, down |  | | To man’s last dust, drain fast towards man’s first slime. |  | |

This was one of quite a number of [sonnets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnets) written in the spring of 1877 whilst Hopkins was at St.Beuno’s. This sonnet was originally entitled Walking by the Sea, but the title and the second [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) were revised in 1882.

It is a regular [Petrarchan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Petrarchan) [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet), rhyming abbaabbacdcdcd, with a clearly marked division between [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) and [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), with, unusually, each section being again divided into half, into two quatrains or two [tercets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercets), as the case may be.

In the octave, Hopkins compares two ancient sounds: that of the sea, and that of a songbird, the skylark, one of whose favourite haunts is sand dunes. The first quatrain deals with the sea. Hopkins is walking along the shore near the North Wales town of Rhyl, some six or seven miles from the college. Rhyl was then an up-and-coming tourist resort on account of its wide sandy beach. Walking westwards, he would have the sea on his right hand. He remarks particularly on the contrasting sounds of the high and the low tide

The octave is purely descriptive, giving detailed imagery of sea and skylark as Hopkins forms as precise an [inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape) of them as he can. It is left to the sestet to make a comment, this time in the form of an exclamation (l.9), rather than by posing a question (as in [*The Starlight Night*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/707) or [*Spring*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/696)).

The sestet sees the two things which, according to the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible), were created by[God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God), as shaming the man-made town which lies behind him. The town is a[symbol](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/symbol) of man’s [Fall](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Fall) from a much better, more innocent ‘prime’. There is heavy irony here as Hopkins picks up the theme of the ugliness of modern life, and compares it to the uniqueness and beauty of nature.

The irony springs from a further irony. Though Darwinism and [Christianity](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christianity) are often seen as opposed, both agree that humankind is the highest form of development in the world. In the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible), the [Psalmist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Psalmist) asks:

What is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.’ (Psalm 8:4-6 AV)

However, to Hopkins, humanity’s so-called progress is ‘towards man’s first slime’: in its superficiality, it is reversing down any so-called chain of evolution. As in [*Spring*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/696), he believes humankind’s [Paradise](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Paradise) has been lost, and people have fallen away from the way God intended them to be.

The second quatrain centres on the skylark, one of a number of birds Hopkins’ attention is drawn to in his poetry (falcons and thrushes are two other examples). On his left hand lie the sand dunes, over which the lark is soaring. The imagery seeks to convert sound into sight, as we are asked to see the bird’s song as a musical score, pouring out of its throat, then falling like a fisherman’s line reeling out. It is not a straight line as there are kinks in it where the line has been pressed into the reel. Each kink represents a bar-line. And the line is being rewound on to another reel, which the bird will take when he swoops downwards, so he can begin again. Such a complicated [image](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/image) is often called a [conceit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/conceit). The word ‘re-winded’ is a play on words, as a fisherman rewinds the reel, but also an instrument is winded or played, as in ‘winding a horn’.

**Investigating The Sea and the Skylark**

* ‘Trench’(l.2) means 'to make a deep impression on'.
  + What lines or images or ideas in the poem have made a deep impression on you?
* Some of the [metre](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metre) of the poem is very regular and smooth; other lines are very emphatic, having extra [stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress)ed syllables.
  + Can you [scan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scan) ll.4 and 14 and see this?
  + Why is Hopkins so emphatic?
  + Are there other heavily-stressed lines that you can hear as you read the poem?
* Do you think Hopkins is making too big a jump between octave and sestet?
  + Is he too ready to ‘preach’, or has he laid the foundation of his thought sufficiently in the octave?

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| **The Windhover** |
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|  |
| *To Christ our Lord* |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion, king- |  | | dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding |  | | Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding |  | | High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing |  | | In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing, | *5* | | As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding |  | | Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding |  | | Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing! |  | |  |  | | Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here |  | | Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion | *10* | | Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier! |  | |  |  | | No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion |  | | Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, |  | | Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion. |  | |  |  | |

#### Summary

The windhover is a bird with the rare ability to hover in the air, essentially flying in place while it scans the ground in search of prey. The poet describes how he saw (or “caught”) one of these birds in the midst of its hovering. The bird strikes the poet as the darling (“minion”) of the morning, the crown prince (“dauphin”) of the kingdom of daylight, drawn by the dappled colors of dawn. It rides the air as if it were on horseback, moving with steady control like a rider whose hold on the rein is sure and firm. In the poet’s imagination, the windhover sits high and proud, tightly reined in, wings quivering and tense. Its motion is controlled and suspended in an ecstatic moment of concentrated energy. Then, in the next moment, the bird is off again, now like an ice skater balancing forces as he makes a turn. The bird, first matching the wind’s force in order to stay still, now “rebuff[s] the big wind” with its forward propulsion. At the same moment, the poet feels his own heart stir, or lurch forward out of “hiding,” as it were—moved by “the achieve of, the mastery of” the bird’s performance.

The opening of the sestet serves as both a further elaboration on the bird’s movement and an injunction to the poet’s own heart. The “beauty,” “valour,” and “act” (like “air,” “pride,” and “plume”) “here buckle.” “Buckle” is the verb here; it denotes either a fastening (like the buckling of a belt), a coming together of these different parts of a creature’s being, or an acquiescent collapse (like the “buckling” of the knees), in which all parts subordinate themselves into some larger purpose or cause. In either case, a unification takes place. At the moment of this integration, a glorious fire issues forth, of the same order as the glory of Christ’s life and crucifixion, though not as grand.

#### Form

The confusing grammatical structures and sentence order in this sonnet contribute to its difficulty, but they also represent a masterful use of language. Hopkins blends and confuses adjectives, verbs, and subjects in order to echo his theme of smooth merging: the bird’s perfect immersion in the air, and the fact that his self and his action are inseparable. Note, too, how important the “-ing” ending is to the poem’s rhyme scheme; it occurs in verbs, adjectives, and nouns, linking the different parts of the sentences together in an intense unity. A great number of verbs are packed into a short space of lines, as Hopkins tries to nail down with as much descriptive precision as possible the exact character of the bird’s motion.

“The Windhover” is written in “sprung rhythm,” a meter in which the number of accents in a line are counted but the number of syllables does not matter. This technique allows Hopkins to vary the speed of his lines so as to capture the bird’s pausing and racing. Listen to the hovering rhythm of “the rolling level underneath him steady air,” and the arched brightness of “and striding high there.” The poem slows abruptly at the end, pausing in awe to reflect on Christ.

#### Commentary

This poem follows the pattern of so many of Hopkins’s sonnets, in that a sensuous experience or description leads to a set of moral reflections. Part of the beauty of the poem lies in the way Hopkins integrates his masterful description of a bird’s physical feat with an account of his own heart’s response at the end of the first stanza. However, the sestet has puzzled many readers because it seems to diverge so widely from the material introduced in the octave. At line nine, the poem shifts into the present tense, away from the recollection of the bird. The horse-and-rider metaphor with which Hopkins depicted the windhover’s motion now give way to the phrase “my chevalier”—a traditional Medieval image of Christ as a knight on horseback, to which the poem’s subtitle (or dedication) gives the reader a clue. The transition between octave and sestet comes with the statement in lines 9-11 that the natural (“brute”) beauty of the bird in flight is but a spark in comparison with the glory of Christ, whose grandeur and spiritual power are “a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous.”

The first sentence of the sestet can read as either descriptive or imperative, or both. The idea is that something glorious happens when a being’s physical body, will, and action are all brought into accordance with God’s will, culminating in the perfect self-expression. Hopkins, realizing that his own heart was “in hiding,” or not fully committed to its own purpose, draws inspiration from the bird’s perfectly self-contained, self-reflecting action. Just as the hovering is the action most distinctive and self-defining for the windhover, so spiritual striving is man’s most essential aspect. At moments when humans arrive at the fullness of their moral nature, they achieve something great. But that greatness necessarily pales in comparison with the ultimate act of self-sacrifice performed by Christ, which nevertheless serves as our model and standard for our own behavior.

The final tercet within the sestet declares that this phenomenon is not a “wonder,” but rather an everyday occurrence—part of what it means to be human. This striving, far from exhausting the individual, serves to bring out his or her inner glow—much as the daily use of a metal plow, instead of wearing it down, actually polishes it—causing it to sparkle and shine. The suggestion is that there is a glittering, luminous core to every individual, which a concerted religious life can expose. The subsequent image is of embers breaking open to reveal a smoldering interior. Hopkins words this image so as to relate the concept back to the Crucifixion: The verb “gash” (which doubles for “gush”) suggests the wounding of Christ’s body and the shedding of his “gold-vermilion” blood.

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| PIED BEAUTY  GLORY be to God for dappled things— |  |
| For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow; |  |
| For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; |  |
| Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings; |  |
| Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough; | *5* |
| And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim. |  |
|  |  |
| All things counter, original, spare, strange; |  |
| Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) |  |
| With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; |  |
| He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: | *10* |
| Praise him. |  |
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#### Summary

The poem opens with an offering: “Glory be to God for dappled things.” In the next five lines, Hopkins elaborates with examples of what things he means to include under this rubric of “dappled.” He includes the mottled white and blue colors of the sky, the “brinded” (brindled or streaked) hide of a cow, and the patches of contrasting color on a trout. The chestnuts offer a slightly more complex image: When they fall they open to reveal the meaty interior normally concealed by the hard shell; they are compared to the coals in a fire, black on the outside and glowing within. The wings of finches are multicolored, as is a patchwork of farmland in which sections look different according to whether they are planted and green, fallow, or freshly plowed. The final example is of the “trades” and activities of man, with their rich diversity of materials and equipment.

In the final five lines, Hopkins goes on to consider more closely the characteristics of these examples he has given, attaching moral qualities now to the concept of variety and diversity that he has elaborated thus far mostly in terms of physical characteristics. The poem becomes an apology for these unconventional or “strange” things, things that might not normally be valued or thought beautiful. They are all, he avers, creations of God, which, in their multiplicity, point always to the unity and permanence of His power and inspire us to “Praise Him.”

#### Form

This is one of Hopkins’s “curtal” (or curtailed) sonnets, in which he miniaturizes the traditional sonnet form by reducing the eight lines of the octave to six (here two tercets rhyming *ABC ABC*) and shortening the six lines of the sestet to four and a half. This alteration of the sonnet form is quite fitting for a poem advocating originality and contrariness. The strikingly musical repetition of sounds throughout the poem (“dappled,” “stipple,” “tackle,” “fickle,” “freckled,” “adazzle,” for example) enacts the creative act the poem glorifies: the weaving together of diverse things into a pleasing and coherent whole.

#### Commentary

This poem is a miniature or set-piece, and a kind of ritual observance. It begins and ends with variations on the mottoes of the Jesuit order (“to the greater glory of God” and “praise to God always”), which give it a traditional flavor, tempering the unorthodoxy of its appreciations. The parallelism of the beginning and end correspond to a larger symmetry within the poem: the first part (the shortened octave) begins with God and then moves to praise his creations. The last four-and-a-half lines reverse this movement, beginning with the characteristics of things in the world and then tracing them back to a final affirmation of God. The delay of the verb in this extended sentence makes this return all the more satisfying when it comes; the long and list-like predicate, which captures the multiplicity of the created world, at last yields in the penultimate line to a striking verb of creation (fathers-forth) and then leads us to acknowledge an absolute subject, God the Creator. The poem is thus a hymn of creation, praising God by praising the created world. It expresses the theological position that the great variety in the natural world is a testimony to the perfect unity of God and the infinitude of His creative power. In the context of a Victorian age that valued uniformity, efficiency, and standardization, this theological notion takes on a tone of protest.

Why does Hopkins choose to commend “dappled things” in particular? The first stanza would lead the reader to believe that their significance is an aesthetic one: In showing how contrasts and juxtapositions increase the richness of our surroundings, Hopkins describes variations in color and texture—of the sensory. The mention of the “fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls” in the fourth line, however, introduces a moral tenor to the list. Though the description is still physical, the idea of a nugget of goodness imprisoned within a hard exterior invites a consideration of essential *value* in a way that the speckles on a cow, for example, do not. The image transcends the physical, implying how the physical links to the spiritual and meditating on the relationship between body and soul. Lines five and six then serve to connect these musings to human life and activity. Hopkins first introduces a landscape whose characteristics derive from man’s alteration (the fields), and then includes “trades,” “gear,” “tackle,” and “trim” as diverse items that are man-made. But he then goes on to include these things, along with the preceding list, as part of God’s work.

Hopkins does not refer explicitly to human beings themselves, or to the variations that exist among them, in his catalogue of the dappled and diverse. But the next section opens with a list of qualities (“counter, original, spare, strange”) which, though they doggedly refer to “things” rather than people, cannot but be considered in moral terms as well; Hopkins’s own life, and particularly his poetry, had at the time been described in those very terms. With “fickle” and “freckled” in the eighth line, Hopkins introduces a moral and an aesthetic quality, each of which would conventionally convey a negative judgment, in order to fold even the base and the ugly back into his worshipful inventory of God’s gloriously “pied” creation.

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| **Hurrahing in Harvest** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | SUMMER ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise |  | | Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour |  | | Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier |  | | Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies? |  | |  |  | | I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes, | *5* | | Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour; |  | | And, éyes, heárt, what looks, what lips yet gave you a |  | | Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies? |  | |  |  | | And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder |  | | Majestic—as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!— | *10* | | These things, these things were here and but the beholder |  | | Wanting; which two when they once meet, |  | | The heart rears wings bold and bolder |  | | And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet. |  | |

## Inspiration

Hurrahing in Harvest is a [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) written in 1877, whilst Hopkins was studying for the priesthood at St.Beuno’s, North Wales. In a note he tells us how it was written: ‘The Hurrahing sonnet was the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing in the Elwy’, the Elwy being the river that flows through the Vale of Clwyd in which St.Beuno's is situated.

The poem is reminiscent of John Keats’ Ode to Autumn. As with Keats, Hopkins gains an almost [mystical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/mystical) experience, though, because Hopkins was a[Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian), he expresses it much more in religious terms in trying to see God directly in the scene.

More on Keats: Keats, in a letter, describes a similar moment of intense pleasure in looking on the stubble fields whilst on holiday near Winchester. Hopkins’ and Keats’ poems must be set side by side as two of the best celebratory poems in the English language concerning autumn.

## Textual notes

As in a slightly earlier sonnet, The Windhover, Hopkins’ language and poetic[rhythms](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythms) are very complex and syncopated. The [images](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/images), likewise, try to fix the scene exactly: to fix its [inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape) in the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) and, in the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), to work out its particular impression on the onlooker, its [instress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/instress). The result is a complicated but very rewarding poem.

**Investigating Hurrahing in Harvest**

* Try to recall some autumn scenes you have seen.
  + Can you remember the weather and the atmosphere?

## Looking up

The octave is divided into two [quatrains](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrains). The first is more concerned with the skyscape than the landscape, echoing the fascination with sky in [The Sea and the Skylark](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/686) and [The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741). This is picked up in the second quatrain: ‘I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes...’, echoing Psalm 121:

‘I will lift my eyes up unto the hills, from whence cometh my help’ ([Psalms 121:1](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/634#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations)).

In the sestet, however, he is looking up ‘to glean our [Saviour](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Saviour)’, using a harvest image (‘glean’=gather the left-over grain after the harvesters have finished). A vision of God is what is left after the first glory, the beauty gathered by the eyes, is over.

## Blindness

However, according to the sestet, not every one will necessarily see it: ‘but the beholder / Wanting’ (i.e. these things were here, and only (but) the beholder was lacking).

Spectators can not necessarily be ‘beholders’. Yet wherever there is someone there who is able to perceive a [revelation](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/revelation) or insight of God in this scene, then that person’s heart will be lifted even higher in some sort of [mystical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/mystical)experience.

**Investigating Hurrahing in Harvest**

* What do you think ‘eyes’ and ‘heart’ [symbolise](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/symbolise) in the sonnet?
* ll.7,8 are difficult.
  + Can you paraphrase them?
* Is the poem a quietly contemplative one?
  + If not, which words convey a sense of energy and action?
* What other poem uses the word ‘hurl’?

## Nature as God’s Book

God can be seen in his Creation, but he has to be looked for. The perceiver of nature has to be a ‘Beholder’, ‘Down all that glory in the heavens’. God can be read in the sky and cloud by eyes that are attuned to see, that is, the eyes of faith. Thus it is possible to see the hills themselves as ‘his world-wielding shoulder’ (rather like Atlas, who in Greek mythology, carried the weight of the world on his shoulders to stop it falling into chaos).

More on the paradox of God’s presence: In philosophical terms, the perception of God within nature is of [immanence](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/immanence) (the presence of the divine that is to be found in everyday reality). God is immanent in his Creation, even though he is also [transcendent](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/transcendent) (the presence of the divine over and above such reality). This is a Christian [paradox](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/paradox) or mystery: how can God be in and yet not be part of his Creation? The sky is a fitting image of this: the sky both is part of the world, and yet is a manifestation of space, the infinite also. Duns Scotus and other medieval philosophers who influenced Hopkins believed that the supernatural order was the fulfilment of the natural order, not something in opposition to it. So this transition - from seeing God in the natural to seeing God as supernatural - would be exactly in line with such a philosophy.

## Beauty and its purpose

The beholder would not even be looking at nature, however, if the scene or[inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape) was not already beautiful. His/her senses would not be excited:

* The [Romantic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Romantic) poets, especially Wordsworth and Keats, understood this
* So did earlier mystical Christian poets writing in the seventeenth century, like Henry Vaughan and George Herbert.

So natural beauty, however ‘barbarous’, leads to a perception of God.

* In [Jesuit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesuit) [spirituality](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/spirituality), such a perception is called infused or heightened contemplation.

**Investigating Hurrahing in Harvest**

* What is the difference between spectating and beholding?
* Nature gives us a ‘realer’ reply to what question?

## Personification

The imagery in the sonnet mainly stems from its underlying sense of life: the sense of everything being alive in human terms is conveyed by [personification](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personification):

* In the octave, the clouds have a ‘lovely behaviour’, an attribute we would expect only of people
* ‘eyes, hearts’ are given characteristics as if they were whole people, rather than those parts of the body which symbolise mental and emotional activities (i.e. [metonymic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metonymic) - parts symbolising certain attributes).
* ‘lips’ is an example of [synecdoche](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/synecdoche) (a part of the body representing the whole speech organs ).

All this [figurative](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/figurative) language can be rather difficult to categorise, but what is important to realise is how dense Hopkins’ rhetoric and imagery is: it carries the thought rather than being decoration added afterwards.

## Natural imagery

In the sestet, the predominant images of life centre round animals and birds:

* The hills look like God’s shoulder and a stallion
* The heart finally turns figuratively into a bird, with ‘wings bold and bolder’ as it takes flight in its ecstacy (as the windhover did literally in [The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741))
* In l.4 the cloud patterns are described as ‘meal-drift’. Hopkins used the image of meal (ground cereal seeds) in [The Starlight Night](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/707) with ‘mealed-with-yellow sallows’. The texture of the material obviously fascinated him.

**Investigate!**

* Work out fully the visual description of l.4.
* Can you find any other examples of personification?

## Alliterative phrases

The vocabulary of the sonnet works as powerfully as its imagery: the two can hardly be separated:

* ‘barbarous in beauty’ is a striking phrase, an [oxymoron](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/oxymoron), since barbarity usually suggests ugliness
* The b-[alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration) is emphatic, as we think perhaps of the stooks (sheaves) as spears or other weapons
* Similar alliterating phrases that catch our ear are ‘wind-walks’; ‘silk-sack’, ‘wilful-wavier’, ‘world-wielding’.

More on Hopkins’ alliteration: Alliterative phrases are Hopkins’ trademark, deriving from Old English poetry, where similar compound phrases are known as ‘kennings’. Hopkins makes them alliterate, as if he really is fascinated by their patterns and sounds, whereas they do not have to be in Old English.

## Biblical echoes

A key feature of the sonnet is the verbal echoes of biblical language. Hopkins had always studied the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible), even before he started studying to be a [priest](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priest). Even a simple, dramatic phrase like ‘Summer ends now’ has its echo in the Bible:

‘The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.’ ([Jeremiah 8:20](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/637#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations))

We have already mentioned another phrase: ‘I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes’ as echoing a Psalm, but it also echoes Jesus’ words:

‘Lift up your eyes and look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest. ([John 4:35](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/637#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV).

The very title of ‘hurrahing’ may have been derived from [Isaiah 55:12](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/637#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations):

‘for you shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you with singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.’

Certainly Isaiah (an [Old Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Old-Testament) [prophet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/prophet)) is as celebratory of nature as Hopkins, seeing the natural echoing the supernatural.

**Investigating Hurrahing in Harvest**

* Pick out other examples of alliterating word clusters.
  + Which ones do you find memorable?

## Sonnet structure

There are so many features of patterning, that it is impossible to list them all. The rhyme pattern and basic sonnet structure are [Petrarchan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Petrarchan), with each quatrain of the octave ending in a question, though the first question is a rhetorical one. This is in line with the Petrarchan tradition, where the octave question is met with the sestet answer. However, it is not really an answer: only a development of the philosophy underneath the perceptions of the octave.

## Scansion

The lines are basically [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter):

* some lines are slightly shorter (unusually so), as in l.12
* a number are longer (more typically), as in ll.1,8,14

Using Hopkins’ theory of [sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm), it is possible to [scan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scan) the other lines with five feet:

* 1.9 has [stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress)es on ‘-jest-’,’stall-’,’stal-’,’vi-’, and ‘sweet’
* Hopkins counted the ‘-wart’ as an [outrider](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/outrider) (i.e. as extra and not to be counted in the [scansion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scansion)), suggesting that after an outrider, you should take a pause
* his hyphenating of ‘very-violet-sweet’ means all the syllables run together, rather than being seen as three separate words, so ‘very’ can be counted as no more than two unstressed syllables, sort of murmured.

There are some dramatic examples of [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) (run-on lines):

* at the end of l.l: ‘the stooks rise / Around’, where the rising is caught in the carried-over rhythm
* in l.8, where the carried over word ‘Majestic’ hits us forcibly.

Such carried-over lines help the [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing, one rhythm laid on top of another.

## Repetition

The other obvious patterning feature is the use of repetition, mainly of individual words but sometimes phrases:

* in l.1 ‘now; now’, the immediacy of the scene is dramatically conveyed
* ‘l lift up, I lift up’ and ‘These things, these things’ suggest emphatic speech rather than [lyrical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/lyrical).

It is once again the sheer energy of the sonnet, its real excitement, that dictates such word usage.

**Investigating Hurrahing in Harvest**

* See if you can scan 11.4,14.
* Try reading 1.9 in various ways, putting stresses where you would expect them to be (as opposed to where Hopkins might have placed them), and putting pauses where you think best.
  + What seems to you the better reading?
* Try reading the poem dramatically; then lyrically (i.e. with a much smoother, more regular rhythm).
  + Which do you prefer?
* Find two other examples of enjambement.
  + Can you see what effect they have on both the rhythm and the emphasis of the poem?

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| **The Caged Skylark** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | AS a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage |  | | Man’s mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells— |  | | That bird beyond the remembering his free fells; |  | | This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life’s age. |  | |  |  | | Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage, | *5* | | Both sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells, |  | | Yet both droop deadly sómetimes in their cells |  | | Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage. |  | |  |  | | Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest— |  | | Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest, | *10* | | But his own nest, wild nest, no prison. |  | |  |  | | Man’s spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best, |  | | But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed |  | | For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bónes rísen. |  | |  |  | |

“As” indicates a simile, a comparison, is in order. The human soul is not literally a skylark.

Still. The skylark dared strong winds, and now trapped, is “scanted:” it is not only limited, but dishonored, and probably not being treated adequately. The soul is experiencing all three problems to a degree within the body; the first one we are presented with corresponds to the bird’s “free fells.”  Just like the bird would ascend to great heights and swoop down, the mounting spirit within is just mounting. “Day-labouring-out” reinforces the “dull cage,” “bone-house;” it is always dark, always time to rest when one is limited in one’s tasks. Time “labouring” isn’t really one’s own; why even remember one’s freedom?

There are moments, though, when the bird or the soul can be recognized: “turf or perch or poor low stage.” The honors received are only merited: “sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells.” The repetition of “sweetest” reminds us that a bird isn’t the soul, and echoes a song itself. Honor that is only merited is a natural form of nobility, but also nobility that is a shell of itself. These are exhausting “opportunities,” for the environment is fundamentally against the full expression of the bird or soul. Instead of “free fells,” we are presented with “droop deadly;” offend what is higher, and the consequences are more than lost memories. “Fear or rage” exerted against some stupid bars would be comical, if it weren’t reality.

The difference between the human soul and the skylark is revealed, ironically through repetition. The bird’s sweetness and singing are near identical. All we can do is listen and keep listening when he is free to choose his nest.

But souls don’t choose their nests. What is adequate for the soul is that it is embodied, but “uncumbered.” This is not immortality simply; this is God’s promise (“rainbow”) that reverses the order of earth and sky. One wonders if a “rainbow footing” supports the meadow. The descent at the end is not that of a soul.

Resurrection and redemption are very common themes in the works of Gerard Hopkins, but few speak more elegantly of the Christian thought of man's redemption than "The Caged Skylark". But even beyond the Christian themes, its clear from this poem that Hopkins was writing modern poetry even in a [Victorian era](http://www.helium.com/topic/7568-victorian-era). The sprung rhythm, alliteration, repetition and flow of the oral presentation of the poem set it apart as more than just literary, but also musical.

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage  
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells  
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;  
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.

Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage,  
Both sing sometmes the sweetest, sweetest spells,  
Yet both droop deadly smetimes in their cells  
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest  
Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest,  
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.

Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,  
But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed  
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bnes rsen.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (184489)

The Caged Skylark embodies the Christian theme of the human sinful nature which can be set free, as his Jesuit background would suggest, by the resurrection of Christ. The first eight lines paint a portrait of the human spirit trapped in the flesh and bones of the body, much like a bird in a cage. From this prison, humans live their days out in work. Moments of bliss and happiness are overshadowed by pain, suffering and boredom.

The final six lines turn this around and make something more of the image. Our natural inclination, based on the first eight lines, is to assume that freedom from the cage would be the best thing for the skylark. But instead, Hopkins argues that the bird, and our souls, still need a home. For the bird this would be a nest; for the human it would still be our human bodies. But when we have been "set free", our bodies will no longer be a prison. Instead, our resurrection bodies will be light and free. They will be as much encumbering as a rainbow in a meadow-down.

The most striking part of this poem is the "sound" of the lyrical structure. The first 8-10 lines resonate with such a dark sound, created by the stresses and alliteration of ominous words and patterns (bone-house, mean house for instance). This is transformed during lines 9 and 10 as the poem talks of a similar transformation in man. The sounds become softer, with more frequent use of "s" (spirit, best, distressed). The image of a rainbow free in a meadow, and the caged bird dropping to his wild nest, provide reinforcement of the idea of freedom in the transformation.

Gerard Manley Hopkins uses sound in his poems to make meaning. Alliteration, repetition, and the occasional cacophony are key. Almost always, the sound of the words directly and overtly mirror what they mean.  
  
In line six, the "s" sound recurs and by "sweetest, sweetest spells," this causes the poem to sound soft and sweet. Yet he uses alliteration for the exact opposite in the second line where the recurring "m" and "n" sounds drone and almost buzz, investing the line with a harsh, defiant tone. The repetition of "bone-house, mean house" makes it all the more insistent. If he had used, say, the "s" effect in that line instead, it would alter the tone and meaning of the whole poem by making it sound more soft and resigned.  
  
My favorite line is "This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age." It's really hard to say, and the hyphenated "day-labouring-out" slows the line down to a crawl. All of this combines to really illuminate the kind of slow, futile, dragging imprisonment of the "dare-gale skylark" and the human soul.

Literary analysis of the beautiful The Caged Skylark poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins, should encompass more scope than the purely religious themes. Many of Gerald Manley Hopkins poems were imbued with a soaringly beautiful testament to the joy of the natural world. Of course, given Hopkins spiritual background in the Roman Catholic tradition, appreciation and praise for his creator were never far away. This literary analysis will focus on some personal observations in one area - the language used in the fusing of the two.

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage

Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells

That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;

This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.

The word 'dare-gale' evokes an image of a stalwart little bird. Despite its size, the little sky-lark dares to risk the mad March winds to get blustered and blown about - and all for the joy of singing its little heart out. It reminds us of the eternal fight of the weak against the strong, of good versus evil, of the eventual prevailing of vulnerable innocence represented by archetypes such as Gandhi and the christians Son of God- against the cruelty of wrong-doers and tyrants.

'Scanted' suddenly tells us that the powers of the brave little skylark have been diminished and demeaned, made scanty or less. The end of that line tells us,monotonously, how ...' in a dull cage.' Gerald Manley Hopkins then goes on to liken this dullness to our own souls, capable of aspiring to so much greatness for the glory of God - yet trapped by the heavy, drab limitations of our cage-like bodies and their temptations and distractions. The word 'mean' echoes the scant emptiness of the preceding line. The words 'bone-house' have echoes of death, similar to another word for death place 'charnel-house.'

The next line about freedom, tells us of the joys of the freedom of free flight, whether of body or soul, on the 'fells' or mountainous moors of Northern England. Dragged [down to earth](http://music.helium.com/topic/6870-down-to-earth) again by the words 'drudgery' and 'day-labouring' we are reminded of unproductive working lives with little hope of personal advancement whether of spiritual or career development.

Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage,   
Both sing sometmes the sweetest, sweetest spells,   
Yet both droop deadly smetimes in their cells   
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Gerald Manley Hopkins then wonders at the ability of the poor caged skylark,or poor encumbered workman, to still sing sweetly

and finishes the stanza with a poignant image of joyful living beings either giving up the ghost like the christians Son Of Man on the cross, or 'wringing' out the last of their precious strength on angrily flapping their fragile little wings against the prison ('cell') bars. This is a sorrowful image of futility.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest

Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest,   
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison

The poet then accurately describes the strange flight of the skylark, which can drop like a stone from high in the sky to its nest in the heathery moors below. It then runs through the long grass unseen so as to hide the whereabouts of its young from predators. Although poor and simple, Hopkins tells us the nest still represents freedom - the bird is there of his own volition.

Man's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,   
But uncumbered: meadow-down is not distressed   
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bnes rsen.

The beautiful natural images of rainbows and 'meadow-down' are reminiscent of the soft dimple the little skylark's breast makes through nesting on the grass and suggests an image of the heart within its little breast and of love. 'Bones risen' finishes the falling rhythm of a skylark's descent with a reminder that Man should not be depressed but joyous when he thinks on the mystery of freedom from life's toil and mistakes when the risen person is released into a freer and higher realm.

Themes In The Caged Skylark by Gerald Manley Hopkins include Resurrection,Imprisonment, Freedom,Christianity,Death,Work,Poverty,Creation,Fli ght.

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| **In the Valley of the Elwy** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | I REMEMBER a house where all were good |  | | To me, God knows, deserving no such thing: |  | | Comforting smell breathed at very entering, |  | | Fetched fresh, as I suppose, off some sweet wood. |  | | That cordial air made those kind people a hood | *5* | | All over, as a bevy of eggs the mothering wing |  | | Will, or mild nights the new morsels of spring: |  | | Why, it seemed of course; seemed of right it should. |  | |  |  | | Lovely the woods, waters, meadows, combes, vales, |  | | All the air things wear that build this world of Wales; | *10* | | Only the inmate does not correspond: |  | | God, lover of souls, swaying considerate scales, |  | | Complete thy creature dear O where it fails, |  | | Being mighty a master, being a father and fond. |  | |

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a very religious man and a lover of nature. He was especially fond of the beautiful Elwy valley in the Snowdonia region of North Wales. And after the English Lake District, you feel nearer to God there than anywhere.

The poem is recollection of time spent there, a time when he had felt totally at one with nature and the world.

The line "Lovely the woods,waters,..." is an allusion to the sing-song Welsh accent and their way of speaking English, in which the normal word order is changed. (It is lovely becomes Lovely it is)

"In the Valley of the Elwy" ( 1877) contrasts the beauty of Wales with man who fails to see in this beauty a call to God. The Welsh landscape had attracted Hopkins from the time when as a seminarian he first entered St. Beuno's; it operated on him with a religious impact. "Looking all around but most in looking far up the valley", he entered into his Journal a week after he arrived there in 1874, "I felt an instress and charm of Wales. Indeed in coming here I began to feel a desire to do something for the conversion of Wales". The same desire is in the sonnet he wrote three years later. He referred to Wales as "always to me a mother of Muses". 6 The mother of muses was with him when he wrote "In the Valley of the Elwy"

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| **Duns Scotus’s Oxford** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | TOWERY city and branchy between towers; |  | | Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded; |  | | The dapple-eared lily below thee; that country and town did |  | | Once encounter in, here coped and poisèd powers; |  | |  |  | | Thou hast a base and brickish skirt there, sours | *5* | | That neighbour-nature thy grey beauty is grounded |  | | Best in; graceless growth, thou hast confounded |  | | Rural rural keeping—folk, flocks, and flowers. |  | |  |  | | Yet ah! this air I gather and I release |  | | He lived on; these weeds and waters, these walls are what | *10* | | He haunted who of all men most sways my spirits to peace; |  | |  |  | | Of realty the rarest-veinèd unraveller; a not |  | | Rivalled insight, be rival Italy or Greece; |  | | Who fired France for Mary without spot. |  | |  |  | |

**Location**

Hopkins wrote this [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) in 1879, whilst he was [preacher](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/preacher) at the [Catholic church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Catholic-church) of St.Aloysius in Oxford. It was the first time he had returned to the city of his undergraduate days. In this sonnet, he praises the [medieval](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/medieval) philosopher who most influenced him, Duns Scotus, who taught at Oxford circa 1300; and takes the opportunity to praise the medieval part of the city. *More on Oxford?*

*More on Oxford:* Whilst back in Oxford, Hopkins wrote a number of poems, including Binsey Poplars and Henry Purcell. Another Victorian poet who praises the old university city is Matthew Arnold in his narrative poem ‘The Scholar Gipsy’ (1853). Much of the old city is now surrounded by modern suburbs that hide the beauty of its medieval origins.

The [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) is divided into two [quatrains](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrains), and the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) into two [tercets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercets) (similar to The Sea and the Skylark and Henry Purcell, among others).

## First quatrain

The first quatrain praises the city of Oxford, Britain’s oldest university (though not much older than Cambridge). Hopkins doesn’t actually individualise any of the many colleges in the city, as we might expect, but rather takes an overall view of the cityscape, trying to detail its particular [inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape), which will be done visually and aurally, in terms of shapes, shades and sounds.

The city is famously situated at the confluence of two rivers, the Thames (called at this point the Isis) and the Cherwell, but these are not mentioned by name; the city is just ‘river-rounded’, that is, bordered by river(s). In fact, Hopkins has an interest in borders and limits:

* l.4 ‘here coped and poised powers’ suggest some tension between city and country
* ‘to cope’ in its oldest form means ‘to meet in combat’.

More on Oxford’s boundaries: In medieval times, the country came right up to the city and made a distinct border for it. If any of you are reading Thomas Hardy’s novel, The Mayor of Casterbridge, you may have noticed that Hardy defines Casterbridge (Dorchester) in exactly the same way.

## Second quatrain

The second quatrain is devoted to criticising the city’s modern suburbs. Some Victorian housing has often had a bad press: people still have to live in the cramped terraced houses in unimaginative lines of roads. In Victorian times there was little town-planning - builders did what was right in their own eyes. Hopkins calls it ‘graceless growth’:

* by ‘[grace](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/grace)less’ he doesn’t just mean 'without artistic merit'
* he uses grace in a [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) sense of having something of the love of[God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) in it

so ‘graceless’ means both unloving and Godless.

* The brick of the new houses is compared to the gray of the stones from which the medieval buildings were made.
* ‘confounded’ is used in the older sense of ‘brought to ruin’.

## The sestet

The sestet then turns to Duns Scotus. This was his city, too. In the first tercet, Hopkins seeks to identify himself in the city with Duns. For Hopkins, the[instress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/instress) of Oxford is thus that of the medieval city, mediated through Duns, ‘who of all men most sways my spirits to peace.’

## Scotus’ philosophy

In the second tercet Hopkins summarises Duns Scotus’ achievements. In medieval philosophy, one of the debates was on the nature of reality:

* Duns Scotus suggested that each individual had his or her own reality or being, but that there was an overall reality that could contain them all.
* In other words, humans can be recognised as such at a universal level, even though none of us are carbon copies of some prototype.
* Hopkins’ poem [As Kingfishers Catch Fire](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/587) sets out this idea poetically.

Medieval debates were intensely complicated and lengthy. Scotus’ Oxford lectures (in Latin) were printed, filling volumes. Hopkins believed that, in his day, Duns Scotus outshone any philosopher from Italy or Greece (even though Duns’ name was used to form the word ‘dunce’ as a mark of derision when his philosophy went out of fashion).

## Scotus’ theology

The other contribution of Duns Scotus that Hopkins mentions is his exposition of what is

called ‘the [immaculate conception](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/immaculate-conception) of the mother of [Jesus](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus)’.

* The [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) talks of [Mary](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Mary) being a virgin at Jesus’ conception:

‘How will this be’, Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?.’ ([Luke 1:34](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/610#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations) TNIV)

* However, to the medieval philosophers there was a problem: would not[Mary](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Mary)’s human sinfulness be transmitted to Jesus genetically?
* Scotus' response was to say that Mary herself was sinless from her birth, so no [sin](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sin) got transmitted.
* To others, this was the same problem, merely pushed back a generation.

Because of these difficulties, the [Roman Catholic Church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Roman-Catholic-Church) did not accept the[doctrine](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/doctrine) until 1854 and [Protestant](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Protestant) churches never have.

Duns Scotus, having taught this doctrine in Oxford, then went on to the University of Paris, where the teaching gained much support.

**Investigating Duns Scotus' Oxford**

* Pick out words and phrases in the first quatrain that describe
  + shapes
  + shades
  + sounds.
* What words and phrases suggest Hopkins’ enthusiasm for Duns Scotus?
* What does the phrase ‘Yet ah!’ suggest to you?
* Do you find it significant that Hopkins makes no reference at all to his own undergraduate days?

## The ugliness of modern life

This theme is contained in the second [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain). Urban sprawl has broken down the strict boundaries of the medieval city. Much as Hopkins liked variegated colours and shades, this new development merely obliterated the true inscape of the city, providing none of its own to substitute.

## Mary as a channel of grace

This emphasis is what he praises Duns Scotus for in the last three lines - in effect the climax of the poem, though coming as somewhat of a surprise to most readers. Nothing really leads up to it.

## Continuity and tradition

The first quatrain and the first [tercet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercet) both emphasise that the traditional balance between nature and civilisation is the right one. People have to re-find the balance.

**Investigating Duns Scotus' Oxford**

* Is there anything significant in ‘this air I gather and release’?
* Do you find the last line a climax or rather an anticlimax?
  + Why?
* Can you see any other themes in the [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)?

Several [images](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/images) stand out, though it is probably the diction more than the imagery that makes an impact on us:

* the ‘base and brickish skirt’, a deliberately awkward phrase, seems to demean the old city. It ‘sours’ nature, as opposed to Duns Scotus who ‘sways’, a graceful movement
* ‘the rarest-veinèd unraveller’ takes a little unravelling! Philosophers tie themselves up in knots, we say, so they need unravelling. But why ‘rarest-veinèd’? Maybe it is a reference to an intellectual aristocracy: we talk of ‘blue blood’ for a good breeding. Or, more likely, it is a reference to the fineness of human veins. Duns was known as ‘the subtle doctor’, that is, he was able to make very fine distinctions in his arguments, a very rare achievement.

**Investigating Duns Scotus' Oxford**

* What images strike you most?
  + Are they visual, aural or intellectual?
* Can you relate any of the images in the octave to those of the sestet?

Two things strike us about Hopkins’ [diction](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/diction): the way he [compounds](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/compounds) words, especially [epithet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/epithet)s, and the use he makes of [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration).

## Compounds

l.2 is composed entirely of compound epithets:

* ‘The dapple-eared lily’ (l.3) reminds us of the ‘dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon’ of ‘The Windhover’ and ‘dappled with dew’ of ‘Inversnaid’. Dappling was a visual effect that fascinated Hopkins.
* ‘rarest-veinèd’ we have already commented on. The pronounced final[syllable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/syllable), marked ‘è’, is perhaps Hopkins trying to re-create the pronunciation of medieval English, where the –ed would always be pronounced in poetry. Thus ‘bell-swarmèd’ in l.2.

## Alliteration

The f- [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration) of ‘folk, flocks and flowers’ echoes a famous medieval poem, ‘Piers Plowman’, which starts with: ‘A fair field full of folk’. Hopkins’ use certainly helps the medieval ambiance. Otherwise, it is the compounds that carry the alliterations apart from ‘graceless growth’ and a few other examples.

## Repetition

Hopkins uses repetition here, most noticeably the ‘Rural rural’ of l.8. The repeated word actually makes the line stretch beyond its [pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter) form, pushing it to a [hexameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hexameter) (a 6 foot line).

**Investigating Duns Scotus' Oxford**

* What is the effect of the compound epithets in l.2?
* What other alliterating phrases can you find?
* Do you see any patterning in the alliteration, or does it just serve the immediate effect of the diction?

## An irregular sonnet

As a [Petrarchan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Petrarchan) sonnet, only the poem’s [rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme) scheme would appear regular. The [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) neither proposes a question, nor does the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) answer any. They simply describe two things that mean a lot to Hopkins. They are not problematised in any way, apart from the modern falling from grace in the second [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain).

## Metre

The [sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm) is difficult to determine in a few lines, but other lines are remarkably regular in [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm) and [metre](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metre), as l.7, which is, however, [trochaic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/trochaic) and not [iambic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic) (i.e. a falling rhythm). Many lines actually begin as trochees, as ll.1,2,4,7,8,13, though switching back to iambics at some point in the line. Thus l.1 starts as a trochee ‘Tów-er’ but then reverts to iambic ‘-y cít-’ and continues as two [anapaests](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/anapaests), then reverts to another trochee with the repetition of ‘tow-er’.

In l.2, what is best to do with the [compounds](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/compounds) is to count each [stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress) as a half, so that the whole compound counts as one stress. So ‘rook-racked’ counts as just one stress. However, ‘Cuckoo-echoing’ is rather too many [syllables](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/syllables) really to get away with just one stress, though this is what is suggested by some Hopkins’ scholars, in order to keep the pentameter line. But ‘cuckoo’ really has to have one stress, as does ‘echo-’, giving us a [hexameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hexameter) again, with a very distinctly trochaic feel.

## Run-ons and pauses

Hopkins uses [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) with carried-on lines in ll.3,5,6,7,9,10,12- almost half the lines of the poem. More difficult is to say how they [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint) the rhythm, and whether it is significant or trivial.

However, several significant [caesuras](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesuras) (mid-line pauses) do counterpoint the rhythm markedly. Thus in ll.3,4, the clause beginning ‘that country’ runs from the caesura in l.3 to the caesura in l.4, and has to be read counter to the metre of the line.

**Investigating Duns Scotus' Oxford**

* Can you work out the [scansion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scansion) for l.3?
* Why do you think the second quatrain is almost entirely carried-on lines?
* Do you see any significant counter-rhythms being set up by the enjambement?
* 1.11 has no internal punctuation.
  + How would you shape the line as you read it?
  + Where would you put the emphasis, pauses and climax?
* Try out which tone you would use to read the poem out loud.

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| **Brothers** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | HOW lovely the elder brother’s |  | | Life all laced in the other’s, |  | | Lóve-laced!—what once I well |  | | Witnessed; so fortune fell. |  | | When Shrovetide, two years gone, | *5* | | Our boys’ plays brought on |  | | Part was picked for John, |  | | Young Jóhn: then fear, then joy |  | | Ran revel in the elder boy. |  | | Their night was come now; all | *10* | | Our company thronged the hall; |  | | Henry, by the wall, |  | | Beckoned me beside him: |  | | I came where called, and eyed him |  | | By meanwhiles; making my play | *15* | | Turn most on tender byplay. |  | | For, wrung all on love’s rack, |  | | My lad, and lost in Jack, |  | | Smiled, blushed, and bit his lip; |  | | Or drove, with a diver’s dip, | *20* | | Clutched hands down through clasped knees— |  | | Truth’s tokens tricks like these, |  | | Old telltales, with what stress |  | | He hung on the imp’s success. |  | | Now the other was bráss-bóld: | *25* | | Hé had no work to hold |  | | His heart up at the strain; |  | | Nay, roguish ran the vein. |  | | Two tedious acts were past; |  | | Jack’s call and cue at last; | *30* | | When Henry, heart-forsook, |  | | Dropped eyes and dared not look. |  | | Eh, how áll rúng! |  | | Young dog, he did give tongue! |  | | But Harry—in his hands he has flung | *35* | | His tear-tricked cheeks of flame |  | | For fond love and for shame. |  | | Ah Nature, framed in fault, |  | | There ’s comfort then, there ’s salt; |  | | Nature, bad, base, and blind, | *40* | | Dearly thou canst be kind; |  | | There dearly thén, deárly, |  | | I’ll cry thou canst be kind. |  | |  |  | |

In Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem,  “Brothers”, the parish has congregated for the production of the school’s plays at Shrovetide. John (Jack), the younger brother, has been selected for one of the roles while his older brother Henry (Harry) attends his younger brother’s debut as an actor. However, more than one drama is occurring on the stage that night. While the audience watches the actors play their parts on center stage, the speaker in the poem (a priest) observes the emotional reactions of the older brother Henry’s response to John’s performance: “I came where called, and eyed him/ By meanwhiles; making my play/ Turn most on tender byplay.” Of course the older brother does not actually summon the priest because the boy assumes no one is observing him; he is not an actual actor in the play. However, the real drama is not the main play on the stage in which the audience watches John play his part. The real action is backstage or offstage where the priest witnesses a beautiful, tender scene of an older boy beholding his younger brother (“brass-bold”) perform with natural poise and perfect confidence: “Nay, roguish ran the vein.”

Henry cannot control his emotions and cries tears of happiness in seeing and hearing the talent of his younger brother: “There! The hall rung! / Dog he did give tongue!” Henry’s tears of joy pour spontaneously as he revels in his brother’s success and thrills for joy because of his brother’s performance, “his tear-tricked cheeks of flame/For fond love and for shame.” As a boy or older brother Henry is embarrassed to be crying in public, but he cannot help it because he is “wrung all on love’s rack,” more nervous than John for whom performing on stage is effortless and natural: “He had no work to hold / His heart up at the strain.”  As the priest beholds the actions and reactions of the older brother, he sees Henry’s nervousness in the form of blushes, the biting of the lip, the clenched hands, the clasped knees, the closed eyes, the hiding of the face in the hands: telltale signs that “Told tales with what heart’s stress/ He hung upon the imp’s success.” The priest, most touched by his unnoticed glimpse of Henry’s deep brotherly love for John, reflects “how lovely the elder brother’s/ Life all laced in the other’s / Love-laced!” The priest refers to this moment as a privilege. He alone witnesses the secret of the unveiled human heart in a stroke of miraculous good luck: “so Fortune fell.”

Although Henry and John would never use such language as “love-laced” or even speak openly of their affection and indissoluble bond as loyal brothers whose lives have been interwoven with all the strands and threads that unite family members in the shared experience and common memories of their lives, it does not change the undeniable fact of the “love-laced,” delicate, strong, intimate brotherly love they silently share. Henry’s unconscious revelation of his emotions captures the beauty, goodness, and purity of the human heart as God designed and intended it when He created man in His own image. The priest has glimpsed for a moment the mystery of divine and human love. The tears of Henry that flow from his eyes begin in the depths of his heart that cannot contain his joy for his beloved brother.  The priest**,** too**,** is so moved and in awe at the purity of the older brother’s love that he also cannot restrain his tears when the profound reality of love’s truth pierces the soul: “Dearly thou canst be kind: / There dearly then, dearly, /Dearly thou canst be kind” he cries as the words mix with the sobs.

In the dramatic climax of this heartwarming moment, the priest reflects on fallen human nature and the human condition: “Ah Nature, framed in fault” and “Nature, bad, base, and blind” describe the world of original sin, the world the priest knows so well from hearing confessions, the litany of the same deadly sins that deface the human nature created in His image. The hard heart, the cruel heart, the impure heart, the cold heart, the ungrateful heart—how commonplace they are as expressions of original sin. Yet this rare momentary glimpse of “love-laced hearts” restores a vision of the image of God indwelling in the soul and shining out, a divine likeness that is as tell-tale as Henry’s clasped hands and streaming tears. As the priest in a moment of “tender byplay” privately witnesses the unobserved drama of Henry’s soul and his powerful unrehearsed performance, Hopkins touches the mystery of love: If Henry can love his younger brother that much to the point of tears and a priest can feel the greatness of human love with such emotion, how can man even begin to imagine the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love for each person whose “love-laced” heart mirrors the loved-laced heart of the Trinity and of the Sacred Heart!

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| **Inversnaid** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | THIS darksome burn, horseback brown, |  | | His rollrock highroad roaring down, |  | | In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam |  | | Flutes and low to the lake falls home. |  | |  |  | | A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth | *5* | | Turns and twindles over the broth |  | | Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning, |  | | It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning. |  | |  |  | | Degged with dew, dappled with dew |  | | Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through, | *10* | | Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern, |  | | And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn. |  | |  |  | | What would the world be, once bereft |  | | Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, |  | | O let them be left, wildness and wet; | *15* | | Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet. |  | |

## A Scottish visit

Hopkins wrote Inversnaid in September 1881, having just completed his duties as a [parish](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parish) [priest](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priest) in Liverpool. He had been sent to St.Joseph’s, Glasgow for a month on temporary assignment before moving back to Manresa House, Roehampton to complete his novitiate. This is his only recorded visit to Scotland. He went on a day’s excursion to Loch Lomond some thirty miles to the north-west of the city, on the edge of the Highlands.

## Wild beauty

The Scottish Highlands had been associated with beauty and grandeur even before William Wordsworth and the [Romantic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Romantic) poets. They were becoming quite popular with Victorian tourists as railway travel made them much more accessible. Even so, the area was still much less developed than today, and Hopkins clearly wanted it to stay that way. However, he makes little attempt to establish its Scottish identity. He uses the Scottish term ‘burn’ and ‘braes’, but nothing else, not even ‘loch’ for the English ‘lake’. To him, what is important is its wild, undeveloped quality.

## The dangers of development

Inversnaid is not the only poem of Hopkins that deals with ecological concerns, but other poems are usually in terms of urbanization encroaching on the surrounding countryside, as in Ribblesdale, which was written the next year, or[Duns Scotus’ Oxford](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/609) or [Binsey Poplars](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/593), both about the spread of Oxford. [God’s Grandeur](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/615) and [The Sea and the Skylark](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/686) are similar in theme. But, in Inversnaid, there is no immediate danger of encroachment, just a general fear. Nor does it contain any [theological](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theological) statement, as the other poems do. It is more a spontaneous cry from the heart.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* Pick out words or phrases that infer the poet’s emotions

## The sensation of a stream

Hopkins describes the different parts of a highland stream, using word-painting to bring out its wildness, hoping that that wildness might never be destroyed. Although Inversnaid itself is a small village on Loch Lomond, the focus of the poem is on a mountain stream rushing down the hillside and emptying itself into the lake.

Hopkins describes it mainly from the bottom upwards, which is how he would have experienced it, having arrived on the lakeside, either by road or, more probably, by ferry. He emphasizes its untameable force as it pours over a waterfall, or series of falls, interspersed with whirlpool-like depths at the base of the cliffs.

* [Stanza](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Stanza) one describes the final fall of the stream, or burn, in its tumultuous rush into the lake
* Stanza two describes the movement of the water in a deep pool formed under the cliffs
* Three moves to higher ground, the plateau on top of the moor, so the stream is smaller and flowing less violently.

All the time, Hopkins is trying to paint detailed pictures of each part of the stream.

* The final stanza is a repeated sort of prayer: ‘Let them…O let them….’. It is not clear who is to do the letting:
  + Is it a prayer to God or to his fellow humans?
  + Is it a prayer at all, or just a heartfelt desire?
  + Or do they come to the same thing?

Certainly, it is an unusual finish for Hopkins, but very memorable in its simplicity. It only takes a few minutes to learn by heart.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* Locate words and phrases that personify the stream.
* Try learning the last stanza by heart.

## Conservation of Nature

This is an implicit, rather than explicit, theme in a poem that consists of description and prayer. Today, people are even more aware of the ‘tourist trap’: tourists love to visit beautiful, isolated places, so they become less isolated, so they lose their attraction. Hopkins was not yet anticipating this, but, as modern readers, we cannot avoid thinking about it.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* Does Hopkins’ poem make you want to visit the Scottish Highlands?
  + Or is your engagement in it purely imaginative?

## A running horse

The [imagery](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/imagery) of the poem is striking. The stream is first described as looking like the back of a horse with its mane streaming out as it gallops down a road. Here the stream is wide enough to look like a ‘highroad’. Its colour is also brown in its turbulence, like a horse, though it is more the particular shape of the water, its [inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape), that fascinates Hopkins. So the foam is like a horse’s hair, but just as if combed or ‘fluted’ (here having an architectural meaning of fine lines cut into stone to give pattern). The sound is represented by ‘roaring’.

## Delicacy and strength

In stanza two, the visualization is of the spray over the pool. The contrast is between the delicacy of the spray and the powerful solid turbulence of the whirlpool like movements of the body of water. So ‘windpuff bonnet’ suggests delicacy, whereas ‘rounds and rounds’ conveys strength. By contrast, as the burn is followed upstream, it almost becomes a person treading through the heather. The [personification](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personification) is increased with the picture of the ‘beadbonny ash’ sitting over the burn.

The last stanza is striking in its absence of imagery. There is a [rhetorical question](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhetorical-question) and a wish, but the words mean exactly what they say. After the complexity and precision of the earlier stanzas, the contrast is striking.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* Which image or images strike you most forcefully?

## Dialect words

Although it is not difficult to make out the general meaning of the poem, particular words and phrases can give trouble. There are some dialect words:

* ‘degged’, meaning sprinkled (actually Lancashire dialect, not Scottish)
* ‘Braes’ is Scottish for hillsides that run up from a stream or river
* ‘Twindles’ is a made-up word, probably from ‘twist’ and ‘dwindle’. Like most creative poets, Hopkins was prepared to invent a word if none existed to say what he wanted to say.

## Difficult interpretations

‘Rounds and rounds Despair to drowning’ is a difficult line:

* ‘Despair’, being given a capital letter, suggests [personification](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personification). It could mean the sensation of watching the water swirl round could give rise to thoughts of despair, even suicide. However, since in [Catholic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Catholic) [theology](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theology)despair was often seen as the worst of sins, and as the overall mood of the poem is celebratory, this seems a forced meaning
* a better interpretation would be: the motion of the water is so strong that it is strong enough to drown despair itself- the strength of despair (which Hopkins was to experience a few years later) is acknowledged, but the force of Nature is even stronger.  
  ‘beadbonny ash’ also takes some explaining:
* the ash tree bears red berries, like beads, but it could also refer to the Catholic practice of using the rosary as a way of saying prayers by moving beads along a cord. ‘Bedesman’ can mean someone committed to praying for other people
* ‘bonny’ is Scottish dialect for ‘pretty’, so a lot is being said in this little phrase.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* Explain the force of ‘darksome’ and ‘groins’

## Songlike form

The verse form here is not a [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet), but a simpler [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) form, with mainly[iambic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic) [tetrameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tetrameter) (four stressed syllables to a line). This is more songlike and creates a faster pace to the poem. Hopkins himself marked some of the[stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress)es, many of which are more obvious because of the striking [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration), for example the many ‘b’s’ and ‘f’s’ of the first stanza.

The [rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme) scheme is also quite simple. What gives the poem [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm)ic strength is the use of clear rhymes in tension with equally obvious[enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) or carried - over lines. So in stanza one, the verse rushes on to ‘flutes’ in line 4, then pauses as the water tips over the final drop into the lake. Although each stanza has two rhymes, they are very similar to each other, thus emphasising line endings, although the enjambement demands we read through them. Once again, Hopkins shows his technical dexterity to create a dramatic[counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing.

**Investigating Inversnaid**

* What effect do you think the ‘b’ and ‘f’ alliteration has?
* Try reading the poem twice:
  + once stopping at the end of each line;
  + the other, following the punctuation only.
    - Which gives the better reading?

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| **‘As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | AS kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme; |  | | As tumbled over rim in roundy wells |  | | Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s |  | | Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name; |  | | Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: | *5* | | Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; |  | | Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, |  | | Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.* |  | |  |  | | Í say móre: the just man justices; |  | | Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces; | *10* | | Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is— |  | | Chríst—for Christ plays in ten thousand places, |  | | Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his |  | | To the Father through the features of men’s faces. |  | |

#### Summary

The kingfisher, one of the most colorful birds in England, “catches fire” as the light brings its plumage to a bright radiance. Similarly, the iridescent wings of the dragonfly glint with a flame-like beauty. These two optical images are followed by three aural ones: the tinkling sound of pebbles tossed down wells, the plucking of strings on a musical instrument, and the ringing of bells as the “bow” swings like a pendulum to strike the metal side. Each of these objects does exactly what its nature dictates, in a kind of (unwilled) self-assertion. More generally, every “mortal thing” might be thought to do the same: to express that essence that dwells inside (“indoors”) of it. “Selves” (assumedly from the infinitive “to self,” or “to selve,”) is Hopkins’s coined verb for that self-enacting, and he elaborates upon this process in the lines that follow: to “self” is to go oneself, to speak and spell “myself,” to cry, “What I do is me: for that I came.”

The next stanza extends this concept from object to man. “Justices” (from the made-up infinitive “to justice”) becomes the verb for that which the just man does or enacts. He harbors a grace (bestowed by God) that reveals itself in all his “goings” or everyday activities. And he acts before God as the being that God sees him as, which is Christ, who is both man and God. Christ dwells everywhere—in bodies and in the expressions of human eyes. It is the beauty lent by Christ’s presence that makes “the features of men’s faces” lovely in God’s sight.

#### Form

The poem is an Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet: 14 lines divided into an octave and a sestet. Hopkins’s variations on straight iambic pentameter enhance the ideas the poem expresses, and the poem provides one of the best examples of his dexterous use of musical effects. For example, examine the third line: “As tumbled over rim in roundy wells.” While the line is neat iambic pentameter, the iambs fall in such a way that they split the words “tumbled,” “over,” and “roundy.” This splitting (which Hopkins called “counterpoint”) effects a regular, quick, and broken feel, and re-creates beautifully the reverberations of stones plunking down a well. The pattern by which the consonants and vowels are repeated and varied replicates the subtle but discernible change in pitch as pebbles of different shapes and sizes strike the water below. Contrastingly, the even accents in the phrase “each tucked string tells” issue forth in plucking regularity and sonorousness. In the poem as a whole, the disproportionately large number of accented words complements the conceptual emphasis on the “thisness,” or individuality, of each thing.

#### Commentary

This poem offers perhaps the most direct illustration of Hopkins’s theory of “inscape.” The term is hard to define precisely—even Hopkins struggled to articulate it—and critics have carped at length over its exact meaning. Coined on the model of the word “landscape,” the term refers to the unifying designs by which the unique interior essences of a thing are held together. The word does not merely refer to what is particular and individual about an object, but posits a kind of inner order or pattern by which these individual essences form a kind of harmonious composition. Moreover, inscapes imply a creator; by paying close enough attention to observe inscapes, one might hope to be lifted to a closer contemplation of God. Hopkins often took the idea of inscape as a standard for the kind of order and beauty that poetry might hope to achieve. The rich density and careful patterning of his poems reflect, therefore, a theological belief in a world whose character is one of subtle and magnificent design.

As with many of Hopkins’s sonnets, this poem turns from a physical first part to a spiritual, moral, or theological second part. More specifically, the poem shifts its focus from *being* (the mere passive possession of essential, defining characteristics) to the more active notion of self-expression, and then to action itself. Hopkins first draws on the physical being of kingfishers, dragonflies, and stones: each aspect he describes is a part of the unchanging nature of the object. However, the sound of the bell moves us more into the realm of deliberate self-expression. Hopkins uses the word “tongue” to link the involuntary ringing to the conscious power of speech. The bell’s ringing is equivalent to a “fling[ing] out of its broad name,” because the sound is so unique to the bell that it defines the object the way a name defines a thing. All of the world’s objects possess and assert uniqueness in the way the bell does, Hopkins declares. And though the objects he has mentioned so far are all insensate or unconscious, he prepares us for the next stanza by extending the characteristic to “each *mortal* thing.” The use of “selves” as a verb is one of the most remarkable things about this poem; by making the noun “self” into an action word, Hopkins enacts his thematic shift from the idea of substance or essence to a phase of activity and purpose.

Now in the sestet Hopkins makes the promised extension from inanimate object to human being; yet the self-asserting that seemed such an inevitable process for the objects described in the octave takes on a different character when applied to man. The process is complicated for human beings, because human beings possess a moral capacity. Thus the enacting of the self cannot happen unconsciously or automatically; rather, it means becoming one’s highest self, or acting to the highest of one’s capacity. A man is not just, Hopkins asserts, until he behaves justly, or “justices.” Furthermore, the implication is that he is not fully a man unless he does so—that being just is part of the essence of man, insofar as the striving for moral perfection is part of his basic existence. Hopkins then extends this concept to the theological idea of God’s immanence in the world, and the Christian belief that Christ dwells within the hearts of men. It is by the grace of God that humans are what they are; more specifically, it was through divine grace that Christ came to redeem men from sin. Hopkins therefore asks that men “keep grace.” This phrase describes the humble acceptance of God’s grace that is the first gesture of Christian life. This acceptance will lend grace to their everyday comings and goings, and will allow man to act “in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is”—that is, to become one with Christ and so fulfill the purpose of his being. Through Christ, this daily activity can become truth, and the loveliness of bodies and faces can correspond to a loveliness of soul in a perfect Christian inscape.

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| **Binsey Poplars** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | MY aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, |  | | Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun, |  | | All felled, felled, are all felled; |  | | Of a fresh and following folded rank |  | | Not spared, not one | *5* | | That dandled a sandalled |  | | Shadow that swam or sank |  | | On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank. |  | |  |  | | O if we but knew what we do |  | | When we delve or hew— | *10* | | Hack and rack the growing green! |  | | Since country is so tender |  | | To touch, her being só slender, |  | | That, like this sleek and seeing ball |  | | But a prick will make no eye at all, | *15* | | Where we, even where we mean |  | | To mend her we end her, |  | | When we hew or delve: |  | | After-comers cannot guess the beauty been. |  | | Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve | *20* | | Strokes of havoc únselve |  | | The sweet especial scene, |  | | Rural scene, a rural scene, |  | | Sweet especial rural scene. |  | |  |  | |

#### Summary

The poet mourns the cutting of his “aspens dear,” trees whose delicate beauty resided not only in their appearance, but in the way they created “airy cages” to tame the sunlight. These lovely trees, Hopkins laments, have all been “felled.” He compares them to an army of soldiers obliterated. He remembers mournfully the way they their “sandalled” shadows played along the winding bank where river and meadow met.

Hopkins grieves over the wholesale destruction of the natural world, which takes place because people fail to realize the implications of their actions. To “delve or hew” (dig, as in mining, or chop down trees) is to treat the earth too harshly, for “country” is something “so tender” that the least damage can change it irrevocably. The poet offers as an analogy the pricking of an eyeball, an organ whose mechanisms are subtle and powerful, though the tissues are infinitely delicate: to prick it even slightly changes it completely from what it was to something unrecognizable (and useless). Indeed, even an action that is meant to be beneficial can affect the landscape in this way, Hopkins says. The earth held beauties before our time that “after-comers” will have no idea of, since they are now lost forever. It takes so little (only “ten or twelve strokes”) to “unselve” the landscape, or alter it so completely that it is no longer itself.

#### Form

This poem is written in “sprung rhythm,” the innovative metric form developed by Hopkins. In sprung rhythm the number of accents in a line are counted, but the number of syllables are not. The result, in this poem, is that Hopkins is able to group accented syllables together, creating striking onomatopoeic effects. In the third line, for example, the heavy recurrence of the accented words “all” and “felled” strike the ear like the blows of an ax on the tree trunks. However, in the final three lines the repetition of phrases works differently. Here the technique achieves a more wistful and song-like quality; the chanted phrase “sweet especial rural scene” evokes the numb incomprehension of grief and the unwillingness of a bereaved heart to let go. This poem offers a good example of the way Hopkins chooses, alters, and invents words with a view to the sonorousness of his poems. Here, he uses “dandled” (instead of a more familiar word such as “dangled”) to create a rhyme with “sandalled” and to echo the consonants in the final three lines of the stanza.

#### Commentary

This poem is a dirge for a landscape that Hopkins had known intimately while studying at Oxford. Hopkins here recapitulates the ideas expressed in some of his earlier poems about the individuality of the natural object and the idea that its very being is a kind of expression. Hopkins refers to this expression as “selving,” and maintains that this “selving” is ultimately always an expression of God, his creative power. The word appears here (as “unselves”), and also in [“As Kingfishers Catch Fire.”](http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/section5.rhtml#kingfishers) Here, Hopkins emphasizes the fragility of the self or the selving: Even a slight alteration can cause a thing to cease to be what it most essentially is. In describing the beauty of the aspens, Hopkins focuses on the way they interact with and affect the space and atmosphere around them, changing the quality of the light and contributing to the elaborate natural patterning along the bank of the river. Because of these interrelations, felling a grove not only eradicates the trees, but also “unselves” the whole countryside.

The poem likens the line of trees to a rank of soldiers. The military image implies that the industrial development of the countryside equals a kind of (too often unrecognized) warfare. The natural curves and winding of the river bank contrast with the rigid linearity of man-made arrangements of objects, a rigidity implied by the soldiers marching in formation. Hopkins points out how the narrow-minded priorities of an age bent on standardization and regularity contributes to an obliteration of beauty. Nature allows both lines and curves, and lets them interplay in infinitely complex and subtle ways; the line of trees, while also straight and orderly like soldiers, nevertheless follows the curve of the river, so that *their* “rank” is “following” and “folded,” caught up in intricate interrelations rather than being merely rigid, efficient, and abstract. Its shadows, which are cross-hatched like sandal straps and constantly changing, offer another example of the patterning of nature. This passage expresses something of what Hopkins means by the word “inscape”: the notion of “inscape” refers both to an object’s perfect individualism and to the object’s possession of an internal order governing its “selving” and connecting it to other objects in the world. (For more on Hopkins’s notion of “inscape,” see the commentary on [“As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame.”](http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/section5.rhtml#kingfishers))

The pricked eyeball makes a startling and painful image; in case the readers have not yet shared Hopkins’s acute pain over the felled poplars, the poet makes sure we cringe now. The image suggests that when the trees disappear from sight, the ramifications are as tragic as the loss of our very organ of vision. The implication is that *we* are harmed as much as the landscape; Hopkins wants us to feel this as a real loss to ourselves. Not only will the landscape not be there, but we will no longer be able to see it—in this way, it really is as if our eyes were punctured. For Hopkins, the patterning of the natural world is always a reflection of God and a mode of access to God; thus this devastation has implications for our ability to be religious people and to be in touch with the divine presence. The narrowness of the industrial mindset loses sight of these wider implications. Hopkins puts this blindness in a biblical context with his echoes of Jesus’ phrase at his own crucifixion: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

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| **Peace** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | WHEN will you ever, Peace, wild wooddove, shy wings shut, |  | | Your round me roaming end, and under be my boughs? |  | | When, when, Peace, will you, Peace? I’ll not play hypocrite |  | | To own my heart: I yield you do come sometimes; but |  | | That piecemeal peace is poor peace. What pure peace allows | *5* | | Alarms of wars, the daunting wars, the death of it? |  | |  |  | | O surely, reaving Peace, my Lord should leave in lieu |  | | Some good! And so he does leave Patience exquisite, |  | | That plumes to Peace thereafter. And when Peace here does house |  | | He comes with work to do, he does not come to coo, | *10* | | He comes to brood and sit. |  | |

The **curtal sonnet** is a form invented by [Gerard Manley Hopkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerard_Manley_Hopkins), and used in three of his poems.

It is an eleven-line (or, more accurately, ten-and-a-half-line) [sonnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet), but rather than the first eleven lines of a standard sonnet it consists of precisely ¾ of the structure of a [Petrarchan sonnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarchan_sonnet) shrunk proportionally. The [octave](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octave_(poetry)) of a sonnet becomes a [sestet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sestet) and the sestet a [quatrain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quatrain) plus an additional "tail piece." That is, the first eight lines of a sonnet are translated into the first six lines of a curtal sonnet and the last six lines of a sonnet are translated into the last four and a half lines of a curtal sonnet. Hopkins describes the last line as half a line, though in fact it can be shorter than half of one of Hopkins's standard [sprung rhythm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sprung_rhythm) lines. In the preface to his *Poems* (1876-89), Hopkins describes the relationship between the Petrarchan and curtal sonnets mathematically; if the Petrarchan sonnet can be described by the equation 8+6=14 then, he says, the curtal sonnet would be:

{12\over2}+{9\over2}={21\over2}=10{1\over2}.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curtal_sonnet#cite_note-0)

Hopkins's only examples of the form are "[Pied Beauty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pied_Beauty)," "Peace," and "Ash Boughs." "Pied Beauty" is as follows, showing the proportional relation to the Petrarchan sonnet (not included in the original: the only indication of the form is in the preface). Accents indicate stressed syllables:

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| Glory be to God for dappled things—  For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim. | {12\over2}=6 |
| All things counter, original, spare, strange;  Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  Praise him. | {9\over2}=4{1\over2} |

Hopkins's account of the form comes from the preface to his *Poems* (1876-89). [Critics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_criticism) are generally in agreement that the curtal sonnet does not so much constitute a new form as an interpretation of sonnet form as Hopkins believed it to be; as Elisabeth Schneider argues, the curtal sonnet reveals Hopkins's intense interest in the mathematical proportions of all sonnets.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curtal_sonnet#cite_note-1) For an in-depth treatment of all three poems, see Lois Pitchford.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curtal_sonnet#cite_note-2) The form has been used occasionally since, but primarily as a novelty, in contrast to Hopkins's quite serious use.

Peace and patience are central to the living out of the life of the Holy Ghost within us. Through peace and patience we live to inherit God's kingdom. Peace, then, the gift that the Risen Christ wanted first for all those to whom He appeared, the condition of spiritual growth, is aptly a dove, the symbol of the Holy Ghost Who brings about the development of the divine life in our hearts. But it is, in the opening lines of the poem, a dove whose shy wings keep it from settling down to "form and warm the life within" the nest. Since it is a dove and a dove settles for its life-giving and warming work on a nest and a nest is found in the boughs of a tree and Hopkins wants this dove inside him, Hopkins is a tree with boughs. It is true that a dove might settle on a bough whether a nest were there or not, if that dove wished only to rest and coo. But, as the poem reveals, this dove has work to do under these boughs, to brood and to sit. A nest is essential. Further, the plumeless Patience would be hard put to it, one imagines, to cling to a bare bough. The nest is Hopkins' heart, the seat of his own life and of the life of the Spirit. It is the heart that is longing for the dove of peace in the opening lines. Hopkins admits to his questioning and pleading heart that the dove does come sometimes with its warmth and protection for the living nest. But his complaint, and the heart's, is that the dove does not stay. It lets itself be driven away, or, as we shortly discover, snatched away by a nest-robber. It allows its own life to die in the daunting wars, and then what will become of the dove's life in the bereaved nest? The existence of those wars indicates the deficiency of the Peace treated in this poem. It is a poor peace if it does not stay; if it were peace wholly it would not allow the wars that kill it. These wars and their nature are discussed fully in Hopkins' later great sonnet on Patience, Poems, No. 70. I turn now to examine this poem, which, since it expands the statement of our image and discloses what happens as Patience plumes to Peace, is worth careful consideration. (Boyle 113) The result of this struggle of the divided heart, wrested toward God by the indomitable will to serve Him, twisting away from God by the self-centered will to serve self, is the death of peace. How can Hopkins justly go on to say, as he does in our poem, that Christ plunders him of peace? The answer is that it is Christ in him and the Spirit sent by Christ Who are fighting along with his God-centered will against his selfcentered will. "The impulses of nature" of which Paul speaks in the quotation above are those desires and aims which lead the heart from God, "the impulses of the spirit" are those which lead to God. These last are the divine life which Christ gives, which the Holy Ghost fosters and broods over. And Christ throws Hopkins into extremities, as He did the nun in Deutschland, so that those evil tendencies may be brought out of hiding and into war with the Spirit and conquered. Thus in Poems, No. 64, "Carrion Comfort," all through the dreadful night of his spirit Hopkins wrestled with a terrible beast Who turns out to be Christ when the light of morning dawns. It was Christ there, reaving peace so that through war "my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear." And Hopkins finds that though he fought against Christ in the night, he also fought alongside Him. The war was in Hopkins' heart, which was grinding against itself. Hopkins comes to know that he fought on both sides, but Christ on only one. But Christ provokes the war. He will not let the heart be, but, as in Deutschland, drives it to bay and forces it to fight. And here in our poem Hopkins considers one aspect of the fight only -- the loss of lovely Peace. Christ has taken it from him, but He leaves him a lesser good, the Patience which does not share in the fight but does what it can to fill up the place of vanished Peace. Its apparent uselessness is only apparent, for though it does not, like the dove Peace, foster and increase the growth of divine life in the heart, it sustains that life in itself and throughout the struggle grows and develops until, the struggle past, it is itself Peace and happily at home in the heart in which it has grown. And, housing there, it broods and sits, bringing with its warm breast and bright wings an increase of divine life. It is the Holy Spirit Who, during the night of struggle, operates as Patience within the battling heart and, during the quiet of the brooding daylight, operates as Peace. Hopkins' ambiguous attitude toward the "wild wooddove" is thus explained. He indicates at first that the dove is too shy to settle under his boughs. There is no question of war there. The bird simply hovers about, finally out of shyness refusing to shut its wings. It sometimes settles, but those wings open again and it roams once more in tantalizing nearness. And yet Hopkins asks the dove why it allows the wars which kill it.

Christ's position in our image from No. 46, then, is that of the Lord Who, while He gives the deepest and most basic peace to the heart united to His, yet can truly say that he comes to bring not peace but war. But, though His follower has no true and lasting peace with others in this world, yet in enduring the pain, separation, and loss, in being a stranger in this world out of love and loyalty to Christ, he grows in the beauty of patience. In No. 46 Hopkins is considering the divine activity in his heart as the work of the Holy Ghost. That divine activity is objectively the work of the Second Person of the Trinity as well as of the Third Person (and of the First Person too, for that matter). Here Hopkins is considering the divine life within him as stemming from the human nature of Christ (for it is the Wordmade-flesh Who brings no peace but war to His followers -- it is this Lord Whom Hopkins follows, Who reaves Hopkins' peace in the poem) and as developing in his heart through the activity of the Holy Ghost, the brooding dove, and as enduring in his bereaved heart while the war rages, through the activity of the Holy Ghost, the fledgling Patience. The sonnet is a shortened one, a curtal sonnet, in the proportions of six to four and one-half rather than of eight to six. The more exquisite structure fits the delicate treatment of the subject. Throughout, the quiet repetitions and the re-echoing vowels imitate the cooing of doves in the woods. Hopkins justifies the transposition of "to my own heart" to "to own my heart" on the grounds that it is "for rhythm's sake" ( Letters I, p. 196). The opening rhythm, imitative of the dove's roaming and shifting, itself shifts from falling to rising, but could not support "to my own heart" at the beginning of the line, with the two slacks building up to the abrupt juxtaposition of the two stresses; the stresses and slacks must alternate to give the soft, continued beat of the dove's wings. Bridges evidently objected to what he considered the weakness of the verb "come" in the fourth line, 4 but in doing so he ignored at least one striking effect of the sound there, in suggesting a momentary settling on the part of the dove (as do "piecemeal peace" and "poor peace" and "pure peace") -- and then the dove rises in the lifting "allows alarms," receiving blows perhaps in the hard d's of "daunting" and "death," these being almost the only tongue-point stops in the poem. The dying away into the two insignificant syllables which end the octet and are therefore spotlighted, "of it," is expressive of the ignominious disappearance of Peace.

The play on the soft opening *p*'s and on *l*'s and *r*'s throughout the poem gives the quiet and smooth lilt that expresses both the subject and the mood. The vowels in a line like "O surely, reaving Peace, my Lord should leave in lieu . . ." are rather rounded or rolled than stopped. The curve of the rhythmic line rises and falls in smooth and quiet arcs, as it does throughout except in line 6, where it roughens, and in the final half-line, where it levels off and stops.

The sweetness and quiet loveliness of this poem express one of the moods with which Hopkins approaches the activity of the divine life within him. The development of all life involves some pain, some struggle, some war. The child's first breath is terribly painful, evidently, to the folded lungs. The growth of Christ's life in our hearts involves the destruction of much that is close to us and most dear, as well as that malice within us which is perhaps closest of all to our blackguardly hearts. Most of Hopkins' later poems deal with the growth of that life within him and most powerfully with the pain which his poor heart so deeply feels. In this poem, Hopkins is still able to accept that pain and that grinding struggle under the symbolic activity of the dove and of the fledgling. He has not yet felt the ultimate and keen blasts which will make him cry like Lear,

. . . the tempest in my mind  
Doth from my senses take all feeling else  
Save what beats there.

|  |
| --- |
| **Felix Randal** |
|  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | FELIX RANDAL the farrier, O he is dead then? my duty all ended, |  | | Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome |  | | Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it and some |  | | Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended? |  | |  |  | | Sickness broke him. Impatient he cursed at first, but mended | *5* | | Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some |  | | Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom |  | | Tendered to him. Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended! |  | |  |  | | This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears. |  | | My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears, | *10* | | Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal; |  | |  |  | | How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years, |  | | When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers, |  | | Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal! |  | |

**Relevant Background**

* GM Hopkins wrote Nature Poetry and Spiritual Poetry, often combined.
* Hopkins was raised an Anglican and was highly educated. He was brilliant at the classics and at etymology (the study of the origin of words). In his early adult life he was seen as unusual but quick-witted and had admiring friends.
* After he converted to Catholicism in 1865 and began studying to become a Jesuit Priest his personality changed. He became aloof and sour, curbing his sense of humour. He resigned himself to the strict rules of Jesuit life.
* Eventually, he became a teacher of classics but with time he was alienated by his religious vocation without being able to face that truth about himself. His *Terrible Sonnets* show that he displaced that alienation into self-disgust.
* Hopkins’ conversion proved problematic. It led more to spiritual suffering than fulfilment. It caused him to suppress his emotions and his poetic talent. Due to his understanding of Jesuit rules, he did not publish his poems.
* Hopkins was intensely devout, obedient and personally strict. This is clear both from the *Terrible Sonnets* and from the homage to God he expressed in many of his other poems. The reader has to decipher whether that homage was spontaneous or out of a sense of obligation—ecstasy or obedience?
* Hopkins’ poems reveal his elation in portraying nature. He had a natural intuition for, and response to, beauty in the world around him. But the poems show that he often transcended, denied or set aside his aesthetic pleasure. He relied on an obscure church philosopher Dun Scotus to justify for himself his delight in pleasurable observation of the natural world. In truth, Hopkins was not happy with himself. His self-torture is manifested in his poetry.
* His frequent inability to sustain his euphoric tone deserves enquiry. Were his lapses from euphoria caused by his despair at human indifference towards conserving the earth’s beauty? Were they caused by religious zeal? Or by puritanical guilt? Or by his perception of his duty as a priest?
* In some of his poems, Hopkins modified his initially excited tone. Sometimes, even in his more up-beat poems, the tone veered momentarily towards despair or disgust. Towards the close of his poems, Hopkins often sublimated his joy at natural beauty into spiritual adulation for God’s power.
* Rather than dwell on sensual beauty or the pleasure he felt from nature’s grandeur, some of Hopkins’ poems reveal how he felt the urge to transcend his rapture and turn his joyous experience into a tribute to God.
* It was unnatural for a man of Hopkins’ disposition to put to one side his sensitive and happy response to all that he perceived. His religious vows caused him to abandon delights and hate his inner self. Increasingly, he grew ineffective as a teacher and preacher and suffered ill health and desolation.
* Consequently, the later poems that Hopkins wrote show how he suffered from self-hatred, guilt, religious doubt, spiritual bitterness and despair.
* Self-denial and genius are a volatile mixture. The combination certainly led to a unique poetic style: obscure expression combined with a rare gift for poetic invention. He used terse and condensed language both to celebrate beauty in the natural world and to expresses his self doubt, self hatred and torture in trying to please an invisible God
* Hopkins had a revolutionary approach to communication and description: He invented words and omitted words; he inverted meaning; he used fresh colloquial expressions; he used daring imagery; he devised new rules of rhythm; he created meaning through extraordinary verbal sound effects and he performed gymnastic feats with syntax leading to condensed meaning.
* Although Hopkins is a difficult poet, knowledge of his background and style will enable assiduous students to de-code him. The rewards outweigh the drawbacks. Hopkins’ great achievement is that he articulates the unique shape, the texture, the individual beauty and energy of his poetic subjects.
* For unique shape, texture, surface beauty, inner qualities and individuality Hopkins coined the term ‘**inscape’**.
* For the sensation of beauty, the inner energy and life force that the inscape emitted to the perceiver, Hopkins coined the term ‘**instress’**.
* He re-invented language so as to epitomise inscape and to reveal instress.
* In other words Hopkins verbalised the unique inner qualities [instress] and appearance [inscape] of his human and natural subject matter.
* Although a Victorian poet and a suppressed personality, his style is very twentieth century. In literary tradition, his reputation stems from his experimentation with language, the brilliance of his arguments within the tight sonnet form and his epiphanies as he observed the multi-dimensional individuality of everything he beheld. To some he is a radical genius.

**Themes**

1. All individual beauty in nature or man is an expression of God’s beauty:

*‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’ [God’s Grandeur]  
‘For Christ plays in ten thousand places’ [Kingfishers]  
‘A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden’ [Spring]  
‘And the fire that breaks from thee then a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous, o my chevalier!’ [The Windhover]  
‘Glory be to God for dappled things  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow …  
‘Landscape plotted and pieced -- fold, fallow, and plough’ [Pied Beauty]  
‘He fathers forth whose beauty is past change’ [Pied Beauty*]  
*‘Oh thou lord of life send my roots rain’ [Thou art indeed Just*]  
*‘Mended being anointed and all’ [Felix Randal]*

Theme 1 above and theme 2 below can be discussed as a tension within Hopkins.

2. Elation at human experience based on an instinctive response to natural beauty and empathy for the human condition [regardless of God]:

*‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’ [God’s Grandeur’]  
‘What would the world be, once bereft of wet and wildness?’ [Inversnaid]  
‘I* *caught* *this morning morning's minion, king-  
 dom of daylight's dauphin’ [The Windhover]  
‘My heart in hiding stirred for a bird—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing’ [The Windhover]  
‘shéer plód makes plough down sillion shine’ [The Windhover]* ‘Nothing is so beautiful as spring when weeds in wheels shoot long and lovely and lush’ [Spring]  
‘Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying, What I do is me: for that I came.’ [Kingfishers]  
‘…thrush through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
the ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing’ [Spring]  
‘This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears’ [Felix Randal]  
‘thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers’ [Felix Randal]

3.      Everything has individual beauty and its own inner energy:

‘Each mortal thing does one thing and the same’ [Kingfishers]  
 ‘It will flame out, like shining from shook foil’ [God’s Grandeur’]  
 ‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’ [God’s Grandeur’]  
‘All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled’ [Pied Beauty]  
‘*Brute beauty and valour and act, oh,  
air, pride, plume, here Buckle’[The Windhover]  
‘his mould of man’ [Felix Randal]*

4.      Hopkins both cherished the environment and feared for the damage done to it by humans:  
[To show how Hopkins cherished it you should select some of the quotes provided for in themes 1,2&3; for his fears select from the quotes below]

*‘Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
  And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
  And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell*.’*[God’s Grandeur’]*‘cloy’ [Spring]  
  
‘What would the world be, once bereft  
of wet and of wildness? Let them be left’ [Inversnaid]

5. Tension arises from an ambiguous relationship with God. Nature may reflect divine beauty, God is a protecting and redemptive influence but God is also problematic because he is remote.

6. Use some of the affirmative quotes cited under theme 1 above and also the following quotes, in order to discuss both aspects of a soul in crisis:

*‘The Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings’ [God’s Grandeur’]  
‘Since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom tendered to him’ [Felix Randal]  
‘My duty all ended’ [Felix Randal]  
‘Cries like dead letters sent to dearest him that lives alas! away’ [I wake]*‘God’s most deep decree bitter would have me taste’ [I wake]  
*‘Comforter where is your comforting?’ [No Worst]  
‘Mary mother of us where is your relief?’ [No Worst]  
‘Why do sinner’s ways prosper?’ [Thou art]  
‘Thou dost defeat, thwart me’ [Thou art]*

7. Disgust, Alienation, Despair, Self-hatred and Personal Frustration cloud the Aesthetic Vision. Balance the quotes used for themes 2,3,4&5 and also consider the following quotes:

*‘And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell’ [God’s Grandeur’]  
‘the sots and thralls of lust do in spare hours more thrive’ [Thou Art]*‘Sickness broke him’ [Felix Randal]  
‘a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning,  
it rounds and rounds Despair to drowning’ [Inversnaid]  
‘Have, get, before it cloy,  
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,  
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy’ [Spring]  
‘Time’s eunuch’ [Thou art]  
*‘But not I build’ [Thou art]  
‘Pitched past pitch of grief’ [No Worst]  
‘I am gall. I am heartburn’ [I Wake]  
‘Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.  
Self yeast of spirit a dull dough sours’ [I Wake]*‘Their scourge to be as I am mine, their sweating selves’ [I Wake]

**Poetic Techniques**

Some of the quotes below have a colour coding in order to partially highlight sound techniques, sound harmony or verbal music.

**Sound Effects**The colour coding for sound repetition is as follows:

Alliteration

Assonance

Internal Rhyme or Cross Rhyme or Conventional (end of line) Rhyme

Consonance, including sibilance.

Consonance and Internal Rhyme may incorporate Alliteration and Assonance.

Try to add your own further examples

If you refer to these techniques when answering on a poet, state their purpose in re-enforcing meaning or creating the language construct that a poem is. Present them as evidence of the poet’s craft.

**Sound effects:**

*‘rinse and wring the ear’[Spring]*

Musical effects enhance Hopkins’ language and imagery. In the above quote the repeated ***‘ri’*** sound provides a shrill music that imitates the thrush and enhances the meaning of these unusual words for birdsong. The ***‘ri’*** sound is invigorating, a form of *onomatopoeia* as it imitates the birdsong and also is the reverse of the sound of ‘ear’ or ‘ear’ backwards. This analysis shows how far Hopkins will go to achieve a sound effect. Here is another example of onomatopoeia: ‘*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod’.*Figure out why. Find more!

Learn from the following analysed lines how to discover your own sound patterns:

*‘For Christ plays in ten thousand places’ [Kingfishers]  
‘A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the b eginn ing in Eden garden’ [Spring]  
  
‘a billion times told love ier, more dangerous, o my chevalier!’ [The Windhover]  
  
‘What would the world be, [] once bereft of wet and wildness?’ [Inversnaid]  
  
‘Pitched past pitch of grief’ [No Worst]  
  
‘Pitched past pitch of grief’ [No Worst]*

**Rhyme**

Hopkins’ end of line rhyming is very patterned. In the sonnets the rhyme is Petrarchan and mostly according to the following scheme;  
*abba abba cdcdcd*

For example in *God’s Grandeur* the 14 end sounds are as follows:  
od, oil, oil, od, od, oil, oil, od, ent, ings, ent, ings, ent, ings.

There are only four different end-sounds for the sonnet: ‘od’, ‘oil’, ‘ings’ and ‘ent’.

In the other poems there is a set pattern also, easy to pick out. Now try to discover your own. The pattern in rhyme and the evident sound repetitions are intended to suggest order and shape in the universe as designed by God. But this may also reflect Hopkins’ acceptance of a scientific world order—which marked a progressive side to his character.

**Sprung Rhythm**[This is an experimental rhythm technique that added to the fluency of certain poems by counting stressed syllables only. Conventional poetry was based on the iambic foot, an unstressed syllable followed by a single stressed syllable. In Hopkins’ lines only the stressed syllables count—for many of his poems he dropped the formula approach of matching stressed and unstressed syllables that poets usually keep to]. The two main examples are *Felix Randal* and *The Windhover*. Note the 16 syllables you pronounce when you utter the second line from *The Windhover.* Only 5 Syllables are stressed, though*.*

*‘dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding…’**[The Windhover]*

Now try to discover your own sprung rhythm, verbal music/sound effects.

**Tone**

Hopkins tone is rarely light but there is a lot of variation of tone within poems. Add your own examples.

***Solemn:*** *‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’ [God’s Grandeur’]****Admiring:*** *‘Glory be to God for dappled things’ [Pied Beauty]****Anxious/Despairing:*** *‘What would the world be, once bereft of wet and wildness?’ [Inversnaid]****Self-hating/bitter:*** *‘blood brimmed the curse’.[I Wake]****Disgust: ‘****And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell’ [God’s Grandeur’]****Frustration:*** *‘I am gall. I am heartburn’ [I Wake]****Depressing:*** ‘*my lament is cries countless’ [I Wake]****Intimate:*** ‘*O my chevalier*!’ *[The Windhover]****Euphoric:*** ‘*the mastery of the thing!’ [The Windhover*]  
***Tender and awed:*** *‘with ah! bright wings’ [God’s Grandeur’]****Respectful and gracious:*** *‘Thou* *art indeed just, Lord’ [Thou Art]*

**Condensed language** [including **ellipsis**—the omission of words]:  
[‘with’ is **omitted**] *‘blood brimmed [with] the curse’.* *[I Wake]*[**Cryptic**—many words omitted]**:**‘Selves – goes itself’ [Kingfishers]  
[*‘like’ is* **omitted**] *‘Thrush's eggs look [like] little low heavens’ [Spring]*

**Unusual words**

*‘He****fathers****forth’ [Pied Beauty]  
‘****fretty****chervil’ [Thou art]  
‘the****sots’****[Thou Art]*

**Obscure language:**

‘Self yeast of spirit a dull dough sours’ [I Wake]  
*‘the fleece of his foam flutes’ [Inversnaid]  
‘just man justices’ [Kingfishers]  
‘force I must be brief'[No Worst]  
‘a comfort serves in a whirlwind’ [No Worst]*

**Unusual colloquial words:**

‘degged’ [Inversnaid]  
*‘all road’ [Felix Randal]*

**Word play/pun/multiple meaning**

*‘The world is****charged****with the grandeur of God’ [God’s Grandeur]  
‘Pitched past****pitch****of grief’ [No Worst]  
‘dapple-dawn-****drawn****Falcon’ [The Windhover]  
‘****Buckle’****[The Windhover]*

**Invented words**

*‘the achieve’ [The Windhover]  
‘twindles*’*[Inversnaid]  
‘fleshed’ [Felix Randal]  
‘forepangs’ [No Worst]*

**Compound words:**

*‘rollrock highroad’*‘*[Inversnaid]  
A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth [Inversnaid]  
‘féll-frówning’ [Inversnaid]  
‘big-boned and hardy-handsome’ [Felix Randal]* ‘Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls’ [Pied Beauty]  
*‘no-man-fathomed.’ [No Worst]*

**Unusual Syntax** [word order]:

***Clause disorder:*** *‘He fathers forth****whose****beauty is past change’ [Pied Beauty]****Clause disorder:*** ‘till time when reason rambled in it and some fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?’ [Felix Randal]

**Condensed syntax** [word order that **‘inscapes’** and reveals intense emotion]:

*‘Self yeast of spirit a dull dough sours’ [I Wake]***3 subjects, 3 verbs, 1 object (3 alliterating pairs)***: ‘Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse’.[I Wake]*

**Imagery:**

***Metaphor:****‘Oh thou lord of life send my****roots****rain’ [Thou art]****Metaphor:*** *‘Time’s eunuch’ [Thou art]****Metaphor:*** *‘horseback brown’ [Inversnaid]****Simile:*** *‘Cries like dead letters’ [I wake]****Synecdoche****: ‘My tongue had taught thee comfort’ [Felix Randal]  
Metaphor:* *‘the fire that breaks from thee’ [The Windhover]*

**Hyperbole** [exaggeration]:

*‘…a****billion****times told lovelier, more dangerous, o my chevalier!’ [The Windhover]  
‘For Christ plays in****ten thousand****places’ [Kingfishers]  
‘blood****brimmed****the curse’.[I Wake]*

**Form**

Hopkins favoured the Petrarchan form of Sonnet with its switch of thought or feeling between the octave and the sestet. The sonnet is a good vehicle for intense emotion and condensed argument.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Genre** | [Sonnet](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Annotation?action=listsubcat&subcatid=51) |
| **Keywords** | [Death and Dying](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=15), [Dementia](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=1), [Human Worth](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=25), [Prayer as Medicine](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=112), [Religion](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=49), [Spirituality](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Keyword?action=listann&id=133) |
| **Summary** | In this sonnet Hopkins reflects on the long illness and death of Felix Randal, the farrier. The poet watched this "big-boned and hardy-handsome" man decline, until he was broken by "some / fatal four disorders" and his "reason rambled . . . . " At first Randal had railed against his fate, but later, anointed by the poet-priest, he developed a "heavenlier heart" and "sweet reprieve."  The poet reflects on his role as a spiritual healer: "This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears." While the priestly tongue and touch refreshed Felix Randal in his illness, Randal's tears also touched the priest's heart, and so he is left with a sense of loss and mourning when the man dies. |
| **Commentary** | The most important line (9) of this sonnet is: "This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears." While the poet is actually a priest referring to spiritual healing, his sentiment expresses a central truth of any healing relationship. Caring for the ill (in the sense of doing things for them) leads to care for the ill (in the sense of connection and compassion); perhaps this is a re-statement of Aristotle's theory of virtue in which one becomes a virtuous person by performing good acts.  "Felix Randal" also demonstrates Gerard Manley Hopkins's magnificent technical virtuosity as a poet. It is an almost perfect Italian-style sonnet (two a-b-b-a rhymed quatrains [the octave] followed by two rhymed c-c-d stanzas [the sestet]). |

As mentioned in podcast #14, part of the appeal of Gerard Manley Hopkins as a poet is that he produced at least two distinct types of poetry. His earlier works reflect his decision to become a Jesuit and serve as a spiritual exercise. They are generally more upbeat and focus on God and nature. Later in life, however, Hopkins began to question his purpose in life, as he was often sick and his faith was “tested sorely” (773). His poetry became much more pensive as a result. “Felix Randal” is a transitional work; while it still has a Christian theme, the poem has a much more reflective and personal tone than his former works.  
  
In fact, though the title is “Felix Randal”, the poem is just as much and perhaps even more about Hopkins’ ministry. Note that Hopkins’ reaction to the news that Felix is dead is neither sorrow nor joy but a comment that Hopkins own duty toward Felix is “all-ended” (line 1,776). He does not go on to speak of the good times in the man’s life, but rather how his greatness diminished. He describes how he has watched the physical decline of this man, “…his mould of man, big-boned and hardy handsome/pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it and some/Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended” (lines 2-4,776). Felix Randal was a “farrier” (line 1,776), a blacksmith. It is interesting that his decline suits his profession; he loses his shape like a piece of metal in the forge, becoming amorphous.  
  
The second stanza concentrates on Felix as the object of Hopkins’ ministries. Hopkins gives Felix Extreme Unction, “Sickness broke him. Impatient he cursed at first, but mended/Being anointed and all;…” (lines 5-6,776). Extreme Unction is the final sacrament in the Catholic Church, meant to prepare one’s soul to enter heaven. However, Felix’s attempt to skirt Hell began before the Anointing of the Sick near his deathbed, “though a heavenlier heart began some/Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom/Tendered to him” (lines 6-8,776). Notice that the emphasis is on the sacraments the man has received even more than the attitude change that has occurred. This is not a tale of a deathbed conversion. The focus is not on the dying man, but on Hopkins’ work with the man.  
  
The next stanza is explicitly about Hopkins’ specific ministry to Felix. Hopkins describes the connection between the two of them, “This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears./My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,/Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal” (lines 9-12,776). It is interesting that Hopkins portrays the relationship as reciprocal. Hopkins and Felix are both endeared to each other. Felix’s tears which he wipes away touch his heart. That a whole stanza is given to the mutual aspect of the relationship rather than just Hopkins’ one-sided ministry to the man is significant. Perhaps Hopkins was trying to console himself to the idea of ministry, that it was not a constant giving with nothing in return. He needed to know that his personal sufferings had a purpose. Not only that, he wanted his spiritual exercises, his writings, to be missionary. He longed for recognition and was “…preoccupied with his lack of an audience” (774).  
  
The final stanza highlights the difference between the Felix Randal of life versus on his deathbed. In life, Felix Randal was a productive citizen, lively and “boisterous” (line 12,776). His work as a blacksmith garnered him respect, as he was “powerful amidst peers” (line 13,776). However, as he approached death, he seemed the exact opposite: weak, cursing, and unlikeable. Hopkins notes the distinct difference, “How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years” (line 12,776). It is possible that this illustration of a distinct difference in personality and form between youth and old age had its roots in Hopkins’ own disenchantment with his vocation. His later years found him frustrated with a sense of “poetic infertility” (774). In addition, his ministries were tiring, as he later noted, “It made even life a burden to me” (773).  
  
Maybe “Felix Randal” should really be titled “Gerard Manley Hopkins”, as Hopkins seems to have as much trouble reconciling himself to his life as Felix has to his deathbed. Hopkins, like Felix the blacksmith, created much in his early years, but later was overwhelmed by a sense of thwarted purpose. Indeed, the poem focuses more on Hopkins’ reactions and musings on Felix Randal than on Felix Randal himself.

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| **Spring and Fall** |
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|  |
| *to a young child* |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | MÁRGARÉT, áre you gríeving |  | | Over Goldengrove unleaving? |  | | Leáves, líke the things of man, you |  | | With your fresh thoughts care for, can you? |  | | Áh! ás the heart grows older | *5* | | It will come to such sights colder |  | | By and by, nor spare a sigh |  | | Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie; |  | | And yet you wíll weep and know why. |  | | Now no matter, child, the name: | *10* | | Sórrow’s spríngs áre the same. |  | | Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed |  | | What heart heard of, ghost guessed: |  | | It ís the blight man was born for, |  | | It is Margaret you mourn for. | *15* | |  |  | |

#### Summary

The poem opens with a question to a child: “Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?” “Goldengrove,” a place whose name suggests an idyllic play-world, is “unleaving,” or losing its leaves as winter approaches. And the child, with her “fresh thoughts,” cares about the leaves as much as about “the things of man.” The speaker reflects that age will alter this innocent response, and that later whole “worlds” of forest will lie in leafless disarray (“leafmeal,” like “piecemeal”) without arousing Margaret’s sympathy. The child will weep then, too, but for a more conscious reason. However, the source of this knowing sadness will be the same as that of her childish grief—for “sorrow’s springs are the same.” That is, though neither her mouth nor her mind can yet articulate the fact as clearly as her adult self will, Margaret is already mourning over her own mortality.

#### Form

This poem has a lyrical rhythm appropriate for an address to a child. In fact, it appears that Hopkins began composing a musical accompaniment to the verse, though no copy of it remains extant. The lines form couplets and each line has four beats, like the characteristic ballad line, though they contain an irregular number of syllables. The sing-song effect this creates in the first eight lines is complicated into something more uneasy in the last seven; the rhymed triplet at the center of the poem creates a pivot for this change. Hopkins’ “sprung rhythm” meter (see the [Analysis](http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/plotanalysis.html#analysis) section of this SparkNote for more on “sprung rhythm”) lets him orchestrate the juxtapositions of stresses in unusual ways. He sometimes incorporates pauses, like musical rests, in places where we would expect a syllable to separate two stresses (for example, after “Margaret” in the first line and “Leaves” in the third). At other times he lets the stresses stand together for emphasis, as in “will weep” and “ghost guessed”; the alliteration here contributes to the emphatic slowing of the rhythm at these most earnest and dramatic points in the poem.

#### Commentary

The title of the poem invites us to associate the young girl, Margaret, in her freshness, innocence, and directness of emotion, with the springtime. Hopkins’s choice of the American word “fall” rather than the British “autumn” is deliberate; it links the idea of autumnal decline or decay with the biblical Fall of man from grace. That primordial episode of loss initiated human mortality and suffering; in contrast, the life of a young child, as Hopkins suggests (and as so many poets have before him—particularly the Romantics), approximates the Edenic state of man before the Fall. Margaret lives in a state of harmony with nature that allows her to relate to her paradisal “Goldengrove” with the same sympathy she bears for human beings or, put more cynically, for “the things of man.”

Margaret experiences an emotional crisis when confronted with the fact of death and decay that the falling leaves represent. What interests the speaker about her grief is that it represents such a singular (and precious) phase in the development of a human being’s understanding about death and loss; only because Margaret has already reached a certain level of maturity can she feel sorrow at the onset of autumn. The speaker knows what she does not, namely, that as she grows older she will continue to experience this same grief, but with more self-consciousness about its real meaning (“you will weep, and know why”), and without the same mediating (and admittedly endearing) sympathy for inanimate objects (“nor spare a sigh, / Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie”). This eighth line is perhaps one of the most beautiful in all of Hopkins’s work: The word “worlds” suggests a devastation and decline that spreads without end, well beyond the bounds of the little “Goldengrove” that seems so vast and significant to a child’s perception. Loss is basic to the human experience, and it is absolute and all-consuming. “Wanwood” carries the suggestion of pallor and sickness in the word “wan,” and also provides a nice description of the fading colors of the earth as winter dormancy approaches. The word “leafmeal,” which Hopkins coined by analogy with “piecemeal,” expresses with poignancy the sense of wholesale havoc with which the sight of strewn fallen leaves might strike a naive and sensitive mind.

In the final, and heaviest, movement of the poem, Hopkins goes on to identify what this sorrow is that Margaret feels and will, he assures us, continue to feel, although in different ways. The statement in line 11 that “Sorrow’s springs are the same” suggests not only that all sorrows have the same source, but also that Margaret, who is associated with springtime, represents a stage all people go through in coming to understand mortality and loss. What is so remarkable about this stage is that while the “mouth” cannot say what the grief is for, nor the mind even articulate it silently, a kind of understanding nevertheless materializes. It is a whisper to the heart, something “guessed” at by the “ghost” or spirit—a purely intuitive notion of the fact that all grieving points back to the self: to one’s own suffering of losses, and ultimately to one’s own mortality.

Though the narrator’s tone toward the child is tender and sympathetic, he does not try to comfort her. Nor are his reflections really addressed to her because they are beyond her level of understanding. We suspect that the poet has at some point gone through the same ruminations that he now observes in Margaret; and that his once-intuitive grief then led to these more conscious reflections. Her way of confronting loss is emotional and vague; his is philosophical, poetical, and generalizing, and we see that this is his more mature—and “colder”—way of likewise mourning for his own mortality.

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| **Ribblesdale** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | EARTH, sweet Earth, sweet landscape, with leavés throng |  | | And louchéd low grass, heaven that dost appeal |  | | To, with no tongue to plead, no heart to feel; |  | | That canst but only be, but dost that long— |  | |  |  | | Thou canst but be, but that thou well dost; strong | *5* | | Thy plea with him who dealt, nay does now deal, |  | | Thy lovely dale down thus and thus bids reel |  | | Thy river, and o’er gives all to rack or wrong. |  | |  |  | | And what is Earth’s eye, tongue, or heart else, where |  | | Else, but in dear and dogged man?—Ah, the heir | *10* | | To his own selfbent so bound, so tied to his turn, |  | | To thriftless reave both our rich round world bare |  | | And none reck of world after, this bids wear |  | | Earth brows of such care, care and dear concern. |  | |

Alliteration in “Ribblesdale” in the lines “. . . sweet landscape, with leaves throng/ And louched low grass.” The first is the role of humankind in environmental damage.  Though he claims in his later poem “Ribblesdale” that only man can undo the damage  think, however, that when viewed in relation to Hopkins' poem “Ribblesdale,” it can be understood as God's concern with sin and suffering, not only in the human experience, but also in the natural environment.  As such, it is half of the solution to environmental peril.

The tone of this poem about the plight of the earth is desperate.  “Earth, sweet Earth, sweet landscape,” is not joyful or celebrative-certainly not in the context of the whole poem.  It suggests, instead, sorrow at loss and desperation at the absence of hope for recovery.

The first stanza presents the earth's personified predicament: wanting to appeal to the creator but having no tongue.  The second stanza provides an insight into Hopkins' concept of creation as continuous and continuing: “he,” to whom the earth wants to make its strong appeal (God), not only “dealt” or created dales and rivers (past tense); he “does now deal” (continuously).  But the second stanza ends with an unexpected turn in the statement: “thou”-the creator-has given creation over to “rack or wrong.”  The blame for that wrong, however, is not the Creator's as the final stanza clarifies.

Meanwhile in the third stanza, the poet asks rhetorically where Earth can find its eye or tongue or heart-some means by which to plead its case-and concludes: nowhere else “but in dear and dogged man.”  Only humankind can advocate for-take responsibility for-the plight of the planet.  How ironic, since Earth's predicament is a human-caused problem.

The potential advocate, then, for Earth is humankind, described as “heir/ To his own selfbent so bound, so tied to his turn,/ To thriftless reave both our rich round world bare/ And none reck of world hereafter.”  The word “reave” means to plunder; it can also mean to rip apart violently.  And I understand Hopkins' lines 10 through 13 to say that those who must take responsibility for the future of the planet are the heirs of the very gang that has plundered and polluted it without reckoning the consequences.  What's more, they can be expected to exploit it, spoil it, and leave it barren in their turn.  But as dim as that prospect for restoration seems, it is the only possibility.  The final line and a half-“this bids wear/ Earth brows of such care, care and dear concern”-suggests that it's no wonder the earth's brow is so furrowed with care and despair!

While Hopkins in “Ribblesdale” seems skeptical of the ability of “selfbent” and “thriftless,” exploitive and improvident humanity, to take responsibility for writing the wrongs

Ominously, in “Ribblesdale,” for example, a damaged “landscape” is inactive and silent. For once, nature cannot act,

does not ring and tell of its Creator. Sadly, the least it can now do is be,

and passively wear a frown. The valley’s voiceless plea to thriftless

mankind is futile. Unless, of course, the action of writing this poem, of

breaking into utterance on behalf of the tongueless earth’s now

motionless meaning, might move readers to take some responsive

action.

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| **To what serves Mortal Beauty?** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | TO what serves mortal beauty ' —dangerous; does set danc- |  | | ing blood—the O-seal-that-so ' feature, flung prouder form |  | | Than Purcell tune lets tread to? ' See: it does this: keeps warm |  | | Men’s wits to the things that are; ' what good means—where a glance |  | | Master more may than gaze, ' gaze out of countenance. | *5* | | Those lovely lads once, wet-fresh ' windfalls of war’s storm, |  | | How then should Gregory, a father, ' have gleanèd else from swarm- |  | | ed Rome? But God to a nation ' dealt that day’s dear chance. |  | | To man, that needs would worship ' block or barren stone, |  | | Our law says: Love what are ' love’s worthiest, were all known; | *10* | | World’s loveliest—men’s selves. Self ' flashes off frame and face. |  | | What do then? how meet beauty? ' Merely meet it; own, |  | | Home at heart, heaven’s sweet gift; ' then leave, let that alone. |  | | Yea, wish that though, wish all, ' God’s better beauty, grace. |  | |

## The question of beauty

This extended or [alexandrine](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alexandrine) [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) is the first of what are sometimes called Hopkins’ ‘Last Sonnets’, written in Ireland, where he went in 1884. Many of these last sonnets are agonising to read, but this one, written whilst on a religious [retreat](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/retreat) in August of 1885, shows no sign of the despondency others show. Hopkins is asking a question about human beauty (see also [The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741) re. natural beauty).

## Two teachings

Hopkins’ own artistic nature made him very aware of beauty, and the teaching of Duns Scotus gave this awareness philosophical grounds. Traditional[Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) teaching includes both:

* that beauty can be a snare
* that we should gratefully accept all God’s gifts.

The poem tries to find a middle way between these two teachings.

## The danger of beauty

The [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) sets out the problem, typical of the traditional [petrarchan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/petrarchan) octave:

* Mortal, meaning human, beauty is ‘dangerous’ (a word Hopkins uses also in [The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741), where it is applied to [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ)’s beauty)
* In medieval times, the word meant ‘ownership, power and control’ so beauty is powerful and controlling
* To religious people, it could be dangerous in the modern sense, too, since it could lead beholders astray, either through vanity or infatuation.

## Can beauty be good?

The artist’s desire is to try to ‘seal’ beauty, capture it in a painting or poem.

More on capturing beauty: How to capture beauty is what the Romantic poet, John Keats, discusses in his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’.

* To a celibate man, like Hopkins, the sight of beauty, as in a pretty woman dancing, could well be distracting (and not just to celibates!)
* If such a beautiful person is gazed on ‘out of countenance’, the desired person merely becomes an object
* However, if beauty is just glanced at then some real good could come, some desire which has a moral sense to it

## Beauty can save

In the last three lines, Hopkins goes on to give the example of Gregory, one of the leadersof the [church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/church) in [Rome](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Rome), who saw two English boys being sold as slaves. He was so struck by their beauty, he enquired where they had come from. Eventually, this led to the [mission](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/mission) of St. Augustine of Canterbury, to England, and the evangelisation of much of southern England (hence the story of the pun on ‘Angles’ (English) and ‘angels’).

## Conclusion

In the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), Hopkins tries to bring a solution:

* Outer beauty can truly reveal an inner beauty
* Even better is to see that all humans are beautiful, and we can get glimpses of their inner beauty
* So don’t reject outer beauty, but don’t make too much of it, either
* The best thing of all is to wish for that other beauty, the [grace](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/grace) of God.

**Investigating To What Serves Mortal Beauty**

* Do you agree that beauty can be ‘controlling’ or destructive if ‘gazed out of countenance’?
  + Are you suspicious of human beauty, or do you enjoy it?
    - What good can you see coming from human beauty?
* Have you ever been able to see beauty in someone, even though at first glance, they seem rather plain, or even ugly?
  + How have you been able to see it?
* Gather together the words that are linked to beauty in the sonnet.

## Beauty and its Purpose

In a letter to a fellow poet, Coventry Patmore, Hopkins wrote that he could see three levels of beauty:

* the beauty of the body, which is both dangerous and fascinating
* beauty of mind
* beauty of character, which could be called grace.

### Beauty of mind

Hopkins doesn’t really talk of beauty of mind in this poem, but may be referring to:

* the idea of the ‘just man’ (see [As Kingfishers Catch Fire](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/587))
* [Paul](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Paul)’s injunction in the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible):

‘Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’ ([Philippians 3:8](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/737#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

## Christ’s beauty

(See also As Kingfishers Catch Fire) Hopkins describes both God’s beauty, and the beauty we are to desire for ourselves or see in others, as the understanding of grace.

* The term ‘graceful’ has become linked to beautiful women or dancers
* ‘Gracious’ is another adjective, which applies more to character
* God’s beauty in terms of grace was seen in Christ, whom Christians believe to be a full manifestation of God in human terms

Thus:

‘And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us....full of grace and truth.’ ([John 1:14](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/737#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

* But the grace was not just in actions, but in his being, as John goes on to say:

‘And of his fulness have we all received, and grace for grace, For the law came through Moses, but grace came by Jesus Christ.’ ([John 1:16-17](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/737#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV).

* ‘grace for grace’ suggests a certain reciprocity between man and God, which seems to be Hopkins’ idea.

### Divine grace

Divine grace is both beautiful in its actions and in its character. The Bible describes it as of love, kindness, mercy and forgiveness:

* Without this association Hopkins would be in danger of suggesting it is easier to love beautiful or even morally lovely people:

‘Love what are love’s worthiest...World’s loveliest’

* The understanding has to be that by God’s grace, it is possible for people to love the unlovely.

**Investigating To What Serves Mortal Beauty**

* Do you see any other themes?
* Both ‘love’ and ‘beauty’ are fairly easy words to get hold of, but ‘grace’ isn’t (See questions on [As Kingfishers Catch Fire](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/587) for research on grace)
  + Why do you think this is?
    - Does reading Hopkins make it any easier?
* What is Hopkins saying by ‘To man, that needs would worship...’?
* Whose law is he referring to in l.10?
  + Is it, for example, a Biblical law, as in ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ ([Mark 12:31](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/737#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations))?

## Image carries thought

Hopkins thinks by means of images, condensing his thought into poetry. For example, in the first three lines: beauty sets ‘dancing blood’:

* The ‘dancing’ is really transferred from the following ‘Purcell tune lets tread to’
* If beauty causes blood to dance, it also ‘keeps warm’
* If it is dancing that keeps you warm, how can you keep warm to ‘the things that are’?

It is in the act of puzzling out the image that we stumble upon the meaning. The little image of the slave-boys is unusual for Hopkins, since it is an extended example of what he means!

‘Self flashes’ doesn’t mean a self-centered ego but a person’s true self, or[inscape](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/inscape). ‘Flashes’ is similar to images of light in [As Kingfishers Catch Fire](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/587) and[The Windhover](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/741): they refer to almost mystical glimpses of hidden glory.

**Investigating To What Serves Mortal Beauty**

* What images are associated with ‘Those lovely lads’?
  + How are they appropriate?
* What does ‘flung rounder form’ suggest?
  + look also at l.5 of Henry Purcell)

## Sexist language

We need to address the question of sexist language in this poem. ‘Men’s wits’(l.5); ‘To man’ (l.9) and ‘men’s selves’ (1.11) would not be tolerated to-day. However, in nineteenth century English, ‘man’ and ‘men’ were really gender-free terms, as much as they were to the translators of the [3Authorised Version3] in the seventeenth century.

## Linguistic simplicity

For all his learning, Hopkins does not use long or latinate words. ‘Countenance’ is as long and latinate as he gets. Typically, most lines consist nearly all of monosyllabic words. This is a much higher percentage than in ordinary speech.

**Investigating To What Serves Mortal Beauty**

* What are the effects of the high percentage of monosyllables in the poem?

## Use of caesura

The significant feature of this extended sonnet is that Hopkins has actually marked in [caesura](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesura)s in every line. Typically, the French alexandrine is constructed round this caesura, which often carries the ebb and flow [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm) of the line. As the first four lines have [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement), our ear is necessarily carried away from the end of the line, and need to find some other place for pauses. Where more obviously than at the caesuras? But the caesuras are only marks on paper - they need to be backed up somehow. ll.1,3,4,5 certainly do back the caesura up with punctuation, but not in l.2 (or ll.6 or 8 or 10). So the rhythm in those lines is still tentative, searching for a pause. This is intentional: Hopkins wanted to prevent the monotony of the alexandrine.

## Metre

The [metre](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metre), compared to the other extended sonnets, is fairly regular [iambic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic)[hexameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hexameter). 1.9 is actually a perfect iambic hexameter; there is no need to revert to any theory of [sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm) just here. Other lines are problematic, as ll.4,11.

## The speaking voice

The overall feeling of the [voice](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/voice) and rhythm is that we almost have a dramatic monologue: the sense of the poet speaking out his argument extempore to someone to whom he is trying to make a point.

More on dramatic monologues: Two great Victorian poets, Browning and Tennyson, had developed the dramatic monologue as a serious poetic form, so this suggestion about the poem is not extraordinary in any way.

This would help to explain why the rhythm is irregular, whilst the metre, for once, seems comparatively regular.

**Investigating To What Serves Mortal Beauty**

* Try reading the poem dramatically, as if you were talking to another person
  + Then try to read it more ‘poetically’
    - Which reading seems better?
* Try scanning ll.4, 14.
* The poem as a whole: what seems to you particularly interesting or memorable about the poem?

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| **(Carrion Comfort)** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | NOT, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee; |  | | Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man |  | | In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more.* I can; |  | | Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be. |  | | But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me | *5* | | Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan |  | | With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan, |  | | O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee? |  | |  |  | | Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear. |  | | Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod, | *10* | | Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer. |  | | Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród |  | | Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year |  | | Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God. |  | |

#### Summary

The poem opens with a rejection of Despair, that “carrion comfort.” To “feast” on despair, Hopkins avers, would be like eating something dead and vile. Nor will the poet unravel his “last strands” of humanity by giving up hope, though he is close to hopelessness and the strands are already “slack.” He makes the feeble but determined assertion “I can,” and then goes on to explore what that assertion might mean, what basic action or spiritual gesture might serve to counteract despair: doing “something” that expresses hope, even if it is as minimal as wishing for morning or as negative as deciding not to kill himself.

Having skirted the pit of despair, the poet questions God about the suffering that has drawn him so close to hopelessness. He asks why God would, so roughly, with his powerful right foot, “rock” his world and send him writhing. Why would God swipe at him with the dull and indiscriminate blow of a “lionlimb”? Why, then, maliciously look at him lying there with “bruised bones” and further torment him with gales of “tempest,” while he cowers, “heaped there,” wanting to escape but exhausted and with nowhere to run?

Then the poet attempts an answer. The “tempest” was actually a harvest wind, shucking the “chaff” from the wheat to expose the kernels of goodness concealed within. In patient acceptance of divine vengeance, the poet has “kissed the rod” of God’s punishment—or rather, he corrects himself, he has kissed the *hand* that *held* that rod. Since then he has suffered “toil” and “coil,” yet the act of acceptance has also brought a resurgence of optimism, mounting gradually to a “cheer.” But this word prompts another round of questioning (“Cheer whom though?”); now that he knows that God’s rough treatment of him was for his own good, should he now applaud God for having treated him so? Or does he congratulate *himself* for having struggled, for having met God directly? Or both? The speaker, however far he has come from the brink of despair, is perhaps still trying to come to terms with that dark “year” of suffering in which he struggled with God.

#### Commentary

Hopkins wrote this sonnet at a time when he had just emerged from a long period of depression and inner anguish. The poem is carefully designed to surprise the reader and dramatize the moment of recognition that the speaker experiences in coming to terms with his own spiritual struggle. The interpretation of the poem depends in large measure on how one reads the transitions between the poem’s three sections (the first quatrain, the second quatrain, and the sestet). In particular, ascertaining the poem’s chronology can be troubling, in part because Hopkins withholds an important piece of chronological information until line 10, when the poem first shifts into the past tense. In the second stanza, there is a disturbing immediacy in the poet’s urgent protests against God’s unrelenting persecution; only in line 10does the poet reveal that the trial has already passed. In light of this recognition, the reader must reevaluate the preceding lines. What is the order of cause and effect? Why does Hopkins use the present tense for the past events of the poem?

The order of the events described in the first two quatrains seems to be reversed in the telling. Presumably, the struggle against despair in lines one through four provided a sequel to the violence depicted in lines five through eight. Yet the fact that this second quatrain is written in interrogative form brings it into the present of the poem. It both tells of past events and asks about their meaning from a retrospective vantage (as if from the present). In this interpretation, the poem contains two different narrative lines superimposed on one another. The first deals with a “now done” crisis of suffering and resistance, in which the poet struggled in futility against God. The second “plot” takes place later than the first but is also, one hopes, nearing consummation via the thinking processes that have contributed to the making of the poem itself. This plot is the poet’s attempt to understand the initial crisis—and it is this plot that takes place in the “present” of the poem. In this latter narrative, the content of the second quatrain *does*temporally follow that of the first; it constitutes the (partly self-pitying) questions that still remain even after the poet has decided not to give up hope. These four lines mark the problem of understanding still at hand for the poet, a problem that will then be resolved in the sestet. There, the poet abandons the tone of impassioned self-protection and seeks theological explanations for suffering and spiritual struggle.

Another chronological ambiguity centers on line 10. One might assume that the “toil” and “coil” Hopkins has experienced since he “kissed the rod” are precisely this struggle for understanding, after the experience of complete abjection before God forced his spirit into submission. It is out of that second struggle, in which he acknowledges both God’s and his own roles in the earlier, more wrenching struggle, that his heart is able to recover. On the other hand, we might read the phrase “since (seems) I kissed the rod” differently. In light of that puzzling parenthetical “seems,” one might decide that all the violence of the second quatrain has taken place after Hopkins thought he had made his peace with God. In that case, the crux of the theological problem would lie with the inscrutability of a God who would inflict such suffering on even Hopkins, a priest who had devoted his life to God’s service.

There is also a way of reading the chronology of the poem more continuously. The punishments in the second quatrain are perhaps inflicted by God in retaliation against the poet’s (insufficient) first resolution against despair. In this reading, the poem would imply that the conclusions in the first stanza are unacceptable to God—the decision to “not choose not to be” might seem willful and self-regarding, as compared to the humility and prostration before God’s will at which the poet afterward arrives. In this reading, the renewal of questioning in the last lines might look like a further lapse, as the struggle for understanding continues in the poet’s own heart even though he ought to stand in total acceptance of God’s will.

From the beginning, the poem works to contrast active and passive behavior, and to weigh the two against each other. Despair is a kind of extreme passivity, and a serious sin in Christian doctrine. Hopkins graphically dramatizes the difference between this despair on the one hand and some hopeful spiritual activity on the other. In the eighth line we see the speaker as a pile of bones lying “heaped there,” dehumanized, cowering, panicked, and struggling desperately for survival. The sestet depicts the slow emergence from out of that heap, like an animal rising into a human being: lapping tentatively at strength as though it were restorative water, then seizing joy surreptitiously and, finally, more willfully—with a “laugh” and a “cheer.” This is the purified heart rising out of the pile of bones, with more agency than in the foregoing image of the wheat being stripped of its chaff by a fortuitous wind. In the self-pitying language of the second quatrain, the speaker was a passive victim. However, in the later assessment, he decides that he too might deserve some credit for having battled it out with God, even if he felt comparatively helpless at the time. The image of kissing the rod, likewise, involves an act of self-subordination that is nevertheless an *act,* and not perfectly passive. Not only has this act resulted in a personal purification, but it has also given the speaker something else: a certain measure of joy or contentment.

## A ‘terrible sonnet’

This is one of the ‘terrible [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)s’ written while Hopkins was in Ireland, probably in 1885, with its revision dated to 1887. The title was made for the sonnet by Robert Bridges, being taken from the first line. For a general note on these sonnets, see [Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/690). Unlike that poem, however, this is a very [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God)-centered poem, with frequent allusions to the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible).

## Subtexts

### Job

There are a number of subtexts. The book of [Job](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Job) in the Bible is about a man wrestling to understand why God has allowed all sorts of calamities to fall on him, and is thus the model [theodicy](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theodicy). In the end, God speaks to him when he comes to the end of his questions. In the sonnet, Hopkins is still left with his questions. He does attempt one answer, but it seems only to lead to further questions.

### Keats, Tennyson and Shakespeare

Other subtexts include:

* Keats’ Ode to a Nightingale, where the poet considers suicide as a way out of his intense misery, and also Ode to Melancholy, where he discusses embracing misery, as a way of entering into life more fully
* Tennyson’s The Two Voices also discusses suicide, and we note the two voices in the sestet here- ‘O which one?’ Hopkins cries
* Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* Try to read Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech.
* What is the difference between deep depression and despair?

## Addressing despair

The [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) can be divided into four:

* in the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave)
  + [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) 1: statement directed to ‘Despair’
  + quatrain 2: questions directed to [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God)
* in the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet)
  + [tercet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercet) 1: attempted answer to questions, to bring ‘cheer’
  + tercet 2: more questions to himself in his struggle with God.

## The sin of despair

In [Catholic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Catholic) teaching, despair is often cited as the worst of the [seven deadly sins](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/seven-deadly-sins), since it denies the possibility of God’s [grace](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/grace). The poem opens dramatically with a series of negatives, to convince Hopkins that he is NOT going down that path, whatever the cause of his depression or [dark night of the soul](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dark-night-of-the-soul).

* ‘carrion’ is dead meat, left lying around, which may be eaten by scavengers and birds such as vultures or carrion crows
* ‘despair’ is addressed (or apostrophised) directly, as ‘carrion comfort’. That is, despair is seen as a negative comfort, associated with death, most obviously by suicide.

## Positive negativity

The [parallelism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parallelism) of line 2 (with its image of our body being knit together - used by Shakespeare among others) echoes the idea of negative ‘comfort’:

* the negatives become doubled: ‘Not....cry I can no more’
* then re-expressed as the positive ‘I can’
  + even if it is only ‘not choose not to be’
    - where the double negatives return in a phrase echoing Hamlet’s.

Ironically, the creative process always creates ‘something’, thus paradoxically negating negativity.

## Questioning God

The second quatrain, addressed to God, questions why he is forcing Hopkins into such despair. Hopkins feels ‘frantic to avoid thee’, as God seems to be giving him such a difficult time. This is a very different Hopkins to the one who celebrated service to God in The Windhover. He feels powerless against a God whose right foot can rock the ‘wring-world’, a strong phrase suggesting a world emptied or wrung out.

## Purification through suffering?

The first tercet begins as many sestets would: attempting to find a solution to the problem posed in the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave). The first answer proposed is that ‘my chaff might fly’, an image suggesting that Hopkins’ suffering has been for the purpose of purifying him. The image is that of winnowing cereals such as wheat, throwing it up in the air so that the lighter chaff is blown away and the heavier grains remain. For Hopkins, this has been an ongoing process, to which he has submitted as part of his discipline as a [Jesuit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesuit) (‘kissed the rod’), and up till now, he has been able to find moments of joy (‘would laugh, cheer’).

## A divided nature

Hopkins cannot quite reconcile himself to the process or see himself as submitted to it as he should be. He feels almost like two people- a feeling he bursts out with in the second tercet:  
there is the person who worships [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ) as ‘the hero’, however hard the discipline

* also there is another person in himself who has struggled against [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) in the past
* the feeling at the end is that this second person is still struggling, even though Hopkins declares it to be ‘now done darkness’.

The sonnet finishes in a very open way. A solution has been suggested, but clearly does not really satisfy Hopkins, let alone us as readers.

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* How does Hopkins see God in the sonnet?
  + Find phrases and words that suggest his attitude.
* Make a list of the questions asked.
  + How many are answered?
* To whom is the sestet really addressed?
  + What has happened to ‘Despair’?

## The Temptation to Despair

Despair is a not uncommon feeling. Hopkins has had to face this, but in a brave opening, he rejects it as ‘carrion comfort’. The crux of his resistance is that there is always a choice, an alternative to suicide specifically, even if it is ‘not choose not to be’, which must be the smallest, yet perhaps bravest, choice there is.

The temptation is also resisted by being totally honest. He sees [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) as a tyrant. A less honest person would not care to utter such a ‘non-politically correct’ phrase - at least not PC for a [priest](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priest). This forms the drama of the[sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet), as it becomes a confessional poem.

## The Dark Night of the Soul

The ‘dark night’ experience Hopkins refers to in the sestet appears to be in the past: ‘That night, that year...’:

* this might suggest the experience also described in the first part of [The Wreck of the Deutschland](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/747)
* or, if this poem was revised some two years after it was written, he may merely be referring to a more recent past. This seems more in keeping with the tone, which does not suggest any sort of real, or at least settled, resolution to the inner turmoil.

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* Do you see any other themes in the sonnet?
* Is he ultimately concerned with
  + God’s attitude to him?
  + or his to God?

## Powerful images

The poem is highly imagistic:

* The title itself is a vivid [image](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/image), an [oxymoron](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/oxymoron), as ‘carrion’ and ‘comfort’ have the opposite emotional colouring
* ‘Feast’ furthers the sense of a good thing become grotesque, as we might think of vultures ‘feasting’ off a corpse
* A more conventional image is of the body being knit or stranded together.

## The portrayal of God

The [personification](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personification) of [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) (technically called [anthropomorphism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/anthropomorphism)) in the second[quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) uses [biblical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/biblical) images reserved for God’s power:

* for instance, the mighty [angel](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/angel) in the book of [Revelation](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Revelation) ‘set his right foot upon the sea’ ([Revelation 10:2](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)
* [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ) is called ‘The [Lion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Lion) of the tribe of [Judah](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Judah)’ ([Revelation 5:5](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)), who here preys ‘With darksome devouring eyes’.

Usually such power is exerted over God’s enemies, but here it is applied against his servant, Hopkins, who then becomes ‘frantic to avoid thee’.

## Harvesting the good

At the end of the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave), the imagery anticipates the opening of the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), with ‘fan’, ‘tempest’ and ‘heaped’. In the sestet, this resolves itself into the [biblical](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/biblical)[metaphor](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metaphor) of chaff being winnowed away by the ‘tempest’, leaving ‘my grain...sheer and clear’. (See [Big Ideas: Judgement](http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/29/Judgement).) Some of the biblical imagery comes from the burning of the stubble as one way of getting rid of the chaff; the rest deals with letting the wind do it. The idea of a personal cleansing is best captured in [John the Baptist](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/John-the-Baptist)’s words about Christ:

‘Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor; and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ ([Matthew 3:12](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations), [Luke 3:17](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

## Metonymy

Hopkins uses his imagery metonymically also:

* ‘right foot’, ‘eyes’, ‘Hand rather, my heart lo!’ refer to parts of the body symbolising attitudes of the whole person
* ‘Rod’ symbolises authority and sovereignty; to kiss the rod is to submit to authority, which is re-enacted literally at a sovereign’s coronation.

## Wrestling with God

The final image of fighting, specifically wrestling, comes from a famous and mysterious biblical passage where [Jacob](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jacob) wrestles with God all night, recorded in [Genesis](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Genesis):

‘And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of day ... Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.’ ([Genesis 32:24-30](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_5&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

Just as Jacob did not realise he was wrestling with God to start with, so the same surprise seems to come to Hopkins as he exclaims ‘(my God!)’, not as a swear-word, which is how many people to-day use the term, but as a real ejaculation of horror and surprise.

The two ‘my God’s together then echo Christ’s last cry when dying on the[cross](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/cross):

‘Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying.....My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ ([Matthew 27:46](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/606#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_6&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

For Hopkins to finish on that note is even more dramatic than his opening. He is claiming to share in the desolation of Christ himself.

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* Can you explain the imagery of l.11?
* What strikes you as the most dramatic image of the [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)?

## Hopkins the victim

Hopkins mentions to Bridges that one of his sonnets about this time ‘was written in blood’. It is assumed he meant this one - the tone is so desperate, it goes well beyond the soul-searching of the confession:

* Particularly agonising are such phrases as

‘me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?’

* The repetition of ‘me’ is echoed in the sestet with the equally harrowing ‘me’s of the questions
* Hopkins creates a complicated adjectival phrase: ‘the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, foot trod Me?’ To paraphrase: ‘Is this consolation meant to cheer me, who have experienced my hero flinging me about as part of his divine purposes (‘heaven-handling’) and also his foot treading on me?’

That is one ‘me’. (For a biblical echo, read [Lamentations 3:1-32](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/607#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations))

## Hopkins the combatant

The other ‘me’ is the one ‘that fought him’ (as Jacob did [Genesis 32:24-30](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/607#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)). The two ‘me’s of the divided personality echo [New Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/New-Testament) writer [Paul](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Paul), when he says in a chapter that deals entirely with the divided personality:

‘O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ ([Romans 7:24](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/607#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations) TNIV)

## Compounds and alliteration

* Lastly, we must note Hopkins’ compounds: ‘lionlimb’; ‘wring-world’, ‘heaven-handling’.
* The [alliterative](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliterative) patterns are much less obvious here than elsewhere, but still draw attention to themselves: ‘right foot rock’; ‘darksome devouring’.
* Internal [rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme)s similarly occur briefly but effectively: ‘sheer and clear’; ‘toil, that coil’.
* ‘rude’ means ‘roughly, uncouthly’

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* Look at the number of [monosyllables](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/monosyllables).
  + What effect does such a large proportion have on the reading of the sonnet?
* What other devices indicate the passion or torment in which Hopkins is writing?

## An expanded sonnet

The [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) form has been expanded from the regular [pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter) pattern to a[hexameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hexameter). Sometimes this has been called the [alexandrine](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alexandrine), technically a 12[syllable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/syllable) line. Many lines here are 12 or 13 syllables in length, but a number are significantly longer, and thus the term is best avoided of this sonnet. The sentence structure goes very tightly with the [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain)/[tercet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercet) structure.

## Counterpointing

However, there are significant [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement)s, setting up strong [counterpointing](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpointing)especially in the second quatrain and second tercet. This is where Hopkins’ own agony cannot be contained in the set lines of the sonnet and spills over. Caesurae are apparently dotted haphazardly, again giving the idea of broken-up lines, which are not able to hold a regular pattern.

## Metre

The metre begins as predominantly falling, with the dramatic stress on the first word ‘Not’, an unusual word to stress, re-enforcing Hopkins’ emphasis by a second ‘Not’ beginning the following line. The third line appears to begin with two unstressed [syllable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/syllable)s, but, according to Hopkins’ [sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm), the foot really begins with the previous ‘man’ and the two unstressed syllables follow that, to make the [dactyl](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dactyl). The same thing can be done in l.7, taking the first two unstressed syllables back to the previous ‘scan’, and in ll.8,13,14.

**Investigating Carrion Comfort**

* Try reading the sonnet very slowly, taking long pauses at the question marks.
  + Do you find your voice naturally adopts any particular tone or voice.
  + Does this help to bring out Hopkins’ own emotions?
* Overall, would you say that this was a cry for help, or a particularly honest description of a certain state of mind and spirit?

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| --- |
| **‘No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | NO worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, |  | | More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring. |  | | Comforter, where, where is your comforting? |  | | Mary, mother of us, where is your relief? |  | | My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief | *5* | | Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing— |  | | Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling- |  | | ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief’. |  | |  |  | | O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall |  | | Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap | *10* | | May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small |  | | Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep, |  | | Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all |  | | Life death does end and each day dies with sleep. |  | |  |  | |

## At the bottom of the pit

This is one of the ‘terrible [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)s’, written in Ireland, probably in 1885. It is similar to [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602) in Hopkins’ bleakness and inability to find comfort (or[consolation](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/consolation)) in his [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) devotion and service. In fact, it appears written by someone on the edge of a complete mental breakdown. There is a spiritual state called the [dark night (of the soul)](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dark-night-(of-the-soul)), with similar symptoms but which is spiritual rather than mental or nervous (see [Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/690)). However, the references to Hopkins’ mental landscape in the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) suggest this sonnet may, in fact, be more about breakdown than anything else.

## The desirability of death

Hopkins is trying to describe a state of inner torment in a coherent, restrained way. The effort is almost unbearable at times, from its impassioned opening to its sad ending on a note of the most minimal of consolations: there has to be an end.

## A universal grief

The opening is direct and striking, its negatives echoing those of [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602)'s ‘Not, I'll not....’. What is so bad that nothing worse can be imagined? The answer is ‘grief’, or something beyond grief. Hopkins doesn't indicate a particular cause of grief, rather a general sense of trouble or difficulty. The lack of specificity actually universalises the poem, in that we can read into it whatever negative emotions or situation we identify with.

## Where are the comforters?

Hopkins asks the [Holy Spirit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Holy-Spirit) and [Mary](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Mary) (the mother of [Jesus](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus)) in [apostrophe](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/apostrophe)s and as [rhetorical question](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhetorical-question)s where their comfort may be:

* The term ‘Comforter’ is one given by Jesus to the Holy Spirit:

‘But the Comforter, which is the [Holy Ghost](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Holy-Ghost), whom the [Father](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Father) will send in my name, he shall teach you all things....’ ([John 14:26](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/669#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations))

* Most modern translations use the term ‘Counsellor’ instead. Literally, the Greek word means someone who stands by you
* His other focus, Mary, is seen in [Catholic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Catholic) devotion as a source of [grace](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/grace)and comfort through her nurturing role as mother of Jesus.

Yet none of these expected sources of comfort are there for him.

Hopkins feels totally isolated and his cries of mental pain go unanswered. He feels rather as if a [Fury](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/classics/Fury) is dealing with him. In Greek [mythology](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/mythology), the Furies were avenging spirits, who dealt severely with their victims.

## Nightmare vision

The sestet describes Hopkins’ nightmarish inner landscape. He doesn't feel people are made to bear such inner agony. The only consolation available to him, in the seeming absence of supernatural help, is that:

‘Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.’

It is some consolation, a mini-death, some sort of oblivion.

**Investigating No Worst**

* Collect words and phrases in the sonnet that suggest inner torment.
* ‘world-sorrow’ is probably derived from the German ‘Weltschmerz’.
  + Look up the word.
    - Does the definition seem to fit the sonnet?
* What other consolation does a poet have besides sleep and death?

## Mental suffering

To those who have not suffered mentally, through depression or some other form of mental illness, there is often an air of fear or unreality about it, even an impatience: the attitude which says, ‘Oh, pull yourself together.’ However that is like asking someone to fly by pulling on his shoelaces. Acute mental distress is a frightening, tormenting experience and Hopkins captures it through this poem.

## The dark night of the soul

As a Christian, Hopkins is aware of the [spiritual](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/spiritual) aspect of his suffering. [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God)seems a million miles away, which is a shock when we consider the optimistic and celebratory poems he wrote earlier in his life. However, Hopkins is, above all, an honest poet, who is not going to fake poems or feelings to satisfy some sort of self-image as a priest, nor minimise what he feels. Rather, his job as a poet is to find words and images sufficient to convey the true power of his inner feelings.

**Investigating No Worst**

* Take one of Hopkins’ earlier poems and compare it to this one.
  + If you hadn't known they were by the same poet, would you still be able to tell?
    - Explain how.

## Fear and torment

Words and images meld together densely in the poetic texture. Images and diction of torment predominate, at least in the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave):

* ‘pangs’; ‘wilder wring’; ‘on an age-old anvil wince’ (as if he were being hammered); ‘Fury shrieked’.

In the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), it is more the inner landscape, the mental geography, that is portrayed:

* ‘cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed.’
* ‘fathomed’ reminds us of the sea, as sea-depth is measured in fathoms, so a subconscious / subterranean link is made in the image
* people have ‘hung’ there, suggesting torture again
* the whirlwind provides little shelter in which to ‘creep’ (if you have read Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear, you may be reminded of the mad scene on the heath).

**Investigating No Worst**

* To what do you think the ‘whirlwind’ is referring to?
* What other images strike you in the sonnet?
* Explain the imagery of l.5.

## Anguished calls

Hopkins’ anguished [tone](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tone) is brought out in the language in several ways:

* the diction includes the language of torment
* there is the apostrophising of sources of comfort, who never come
* the pathos of finding what little natural comfort there is for this ‘wretch’ whom he now addresses - himself
* Fury is [personified](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personified).

So there are voices all around.

## Repetition and compounds

There is a marked amount of repetition:

* ‘Pitched...pitch’; ‘pangs...forepangs’ (a birth image?); ‘Comforter....comforting’; ‘O the mind, mind...’
* also the [parallelism](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parallelism) of ‘all / Life death does end’ and ‘and each day dies with sleep’.

The insistence of the repetitions makes them memorable.

There are also several memorable [compounds](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/compounds):

* ‘herds-long’; ‘no-man-fathomed’.

As with several of these dark sonnets, there is a marked predeliction for[monosyllable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/monosyllable)s.

**Investigating No Worst**

* Can you explain ‘Pitched past pitch’?
  + What sort of pitches is he talking about?
  + And what about ‘schooled at..’?
* What is the effect of the internal rhymes in l.11?

## Regularity and counterpoint

The sonnet form seems very regular compared to some. There is a clear[octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave)/[sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) division, and the octave is divided neatly but unobtrusively into two [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain)s. The [metre](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metre) seems to revert to the traditional [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter)form by and large with few [outride](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/outride)rs or hurried feet. Line 4, in fact, barely makes five feet, though to compensate, l.6 would seem to have at least six feet if we count the first ‘Woe’ as stressed (and the alliteration would seem to ask for it). Only the last sad line has an abundance of spondees:

‘Lífe déath does énd and éach dáy díes in sléep’

The other notable structuring device is the [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement), which, together with a number of [caesura](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesura)e, gives a rich [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing. Lines ll.5,6 and ll.7,8 are good examples, as well as the whole of the sestet. Only in the last line does the [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm) become resolved and unified as some glimpse of peace is attained.

**Investigating No Worst**

* For a fuller explanation of counterpointing and the points made in the last paragraph, see the notes on [Thou art Indeed Just, Lord](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/719).
* Look at the alliterations.
  + What is the effect of the p/w alliterations in the first two lines?
  + And the f- alliterations later?
    - Would you say they help structure the poem or, rather, emphasise certain words?
* Overall, would you say that the poem has memorable lines, rather than being memorable in itself?
  + Or would you say it is a remarkably honest depiction of a mind ‘at the end of its tether’?

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| **To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | TO seem the stranger lies my lot, my life |  | | Among strangers. Father and mother dear, |  | | Brothers and sisters are in Christ not near |  | | And he my peace my parting, sword and strife. |  | | England, whose honour O all my heart woos, wife | *5* | | To my creating thought, would neither hear |  | | Me, were I pleading, plead nor do I: I wear- |  | | y of idle a being but by where wars are rife. |  | |  |  | | I am in Ireland now; now I am at a thírd |  | | Remove. Not but in all removes I can | *10* | | Kind love both give and get. Only what word |  | | Wisest my heart breeds dark heaven’s baffling ban |  | | Bars or hell’s spell thwarts. This to hoard unheard, |  | | Heard unheeded, leaves me a lonely began. |  | |

## A complaint

This was one of five poems found in Hopkins' papers after his death. W.H.Gardner, the editor of the Penguin edition, supposes it is also one of which Hopkins said:

‘(they) came like inspirations unbidden and against my will.’

It was written in Ireland between 1885-1886. Unlike some of the later ones, it is a poem of loneliness and isolation rather than any agony of the soul. Hopkins questions [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God), as he does in some of the other later sonnets, wondering why God has allowed such ‘baffling ban’ on his voice being heard. This is presumably a reference to the fact that his poetry was at that point still not being noticed. In this, the poem belongs to a type of literature called the[complaint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/complaint).

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* Can you see any irony in Hopkins' complaint that no-one listens to him?
  + Why do you think the poem may have come ‘against his will’?

## Three levels of isolation

In l.9 of this [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet), Hopkins says he is ‘now at a third/ Remove’. The meaning of the poem is structured round these ‘removes’:

* first remove: from his family by his [conversion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/conversion) (ll.2-4) (See [Author section: Oxford and Conversion](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/Hopkins,-Gerard-Manley/11))
* second remove: from England, since the English will not hear his message (ll.5-8)
* third remove: to Ireland, a foreign country to him (ll.9-10).

## The cost of conversion

In the first remove, Hopkins refers to [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ)'s words:

‘For I have come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law ... He that loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. ([Matthew 10:35-37](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/730#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

This is the cost of conversion: not so much enmity for Hopkins, who stayed on good terms with his family, but more isolation from them. But the ‘sword and strife’ are anticipated by Christ in the previous verse:

‘I came not to send peace, but a sword’ ([Matthew 10:34](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/730#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations) AV)

## English antipathy

In the second remove, Hopkins knows the English will not hear his [Roman Catholic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Roman-Catholic) message, being so staunchly [protestant](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/protestant), so he has given up (‘plead nor do I’):

* It could presumably also refer to some more political message he wants to give, since English/Irish relations at the time were highly politically charged, perhaps about the suffering of the Irish people
* There is some evidence for this in ‘where wars are rife’, but this could be religious in meaning
* It could possibly also hint at the fact that the English do not want to read his poems, but then he found the Irish didn't, either!

## Isolated love

After the third remove, Hopkins wants to qualify his statement. He does receive, and give ‘kind love’. But his need is greater than that. He wants to utter ‘what word/ Wisest my heart breeds’, otherwise he will be like the unprofitable servant who in Christ's [parable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/parable), went and buried (or hoarded) his money and was condemned for it ([Matthew 25:14-30](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/730#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations)).

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* Discuss the meaning of Christ's words about bringing a sword.
* He doesn't seem to know what is preventing his being heard.
  + What phrases express this?
* Why is he a ‘began’?

## Suffering in God’s Service

Serving God is unconditional to a true [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian): believers do it whether they enjoy it or not, though they need to consider first whether they are prepared to pay that price. The trouble is, the cost cannot always be predicted. Only now is Hopkins realising the full extent of the cost he is committed to paying in order to do what he feels God is asking of him: being lonely, exiled and unheard. He can only make the complaint. He is baffled as to where the answer may lie.

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* Does all this make religious commitment seem unattractive? Or is all commitment rather like this, including marriage or even the teaching career?
  + Does Hopkins' poem appear to make his religious commitment unattractive?

## Married to England

The most unexpected image, perhaps, is in calling England ‘wife/ To my creating thoughts’. Technically, many of Hopkins’ happiest poems were written in Wales! But somehow he feels being out of England is emotionally barren, though she is a wife who no longer listens to her husband:

* Usually, we associate marriage imagery to do with Catholic orders in terms of [Christ](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ) as the spouse, symbolised by [nun](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/nun)s wearing wedding rings, so it seems almost sacrilegious here (See also Big ideas: [Bride and marriage](http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/8/Bride-and-marriage))
* Imagery of procreation continues in ‘woos’ and ‘breeds’
* Otherwise, the imagery is remarkably low-key for Hopkins and certainly does not draw attention to itself.

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* Why do you think the imagery is so low-key?
  + What other imagery strikes you?

## Weary verse

As with the imagery, Hopkins’ language and tone seem very muted. There is perhaps a sense being ‘wear-/y’ physically and emotionally. There is a little energy in the exclamation ‘O’, but this is negated by ‘plead nor do I’, a strangely contorted way of putting it.

The [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration) shows the same spark as earlier poems, especially:

* ‘baffling ban/ Bars’, paralleled by the [internal rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/internal-rhyme) of ‘hell's spell’
* the word play ‘hoard/heard/heard/heed’
* the [assonance](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/assonance) of’heed/leave’.

This is the maximum amount of his protest and frustration.

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* As with some of the other poems written about this time, notice the large proportion of monosyllables.
  + What effect do they have here?
* Compare with [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602).
  + For all Hopkins talks of not pleading, do you think the tone is pleading?

## A straightforward sonnet

This is one of Hopkins' simplest and most straightforward [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)s. As with [No Worst, There is None](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668), the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) divides neatly into two [quatrains](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrains), and the[sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) remains undivided, but with almost every line run on to the next. However, there is not even minimal comfort given in the sestet: the complaint runs through with barely a reversal.

The [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter) lines are remarkably regular for Hopkins, barely disturbed even by first foot inversions. The only typical mark of Hopkins' versification in any evidence is the use of [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) and the [caesura](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesura) to create some [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing, as in ll.1,2; ll.6-8; and most of the sestet.

**Investigating To Seem the Stranger**

* Scan l.7.
  + What is the rhythmical effect of it?
* Overall, what do you find most attractive about this sonnet?

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| **‘I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | I WAKE and feel the fell of dark, not day. |  | | What hours, O what black hoürs we have spent |  | | This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went! |  | | And more must, in yet longer light’s delay. |  | | With witness I speak this. But where I say | *5* | | Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament |  | | Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent |  | | To dearest him that lives alas! away. |  | |  |  | | I am gall, I am heartburn. God’s most deep decree |  | | Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me; | *10* | | Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse. |  | | Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see |  | | The lost are like this, and their scourge to be |  | | As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse. |  | |  |  | |

## Sleepless torment

This is another of the ‘terrible [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)s’, written in 1885. It naturally pairs with [No Worst, There is None](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668) in being about the [dark night (of the soul)](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dark-night-(of-the-soul)). Whereas that sonnet finishes with the consolation of sleep, this opens with its impossibility. It is also like [To Seem the Stranger](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/729), in that it is a [complaint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/complaint), though Hopkins calls it a [lament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/lament). A lament is usually in the form of ‘Woe is....’, and although there is an element of ‘Woe is me’, here it is also a dialogue with an ‘absent[God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God)’, disguised as a dialogue with a very present heart, about being in such a wretched state.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* Can you see any difference between a complaint and a lament?
  + If so, how would you categorise this [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)?

## Self questioning

As with several of Hopkins’ later, darker sonnets, the meaning is not difficult. It is more the intensity of feeling that is difficult to handle, especially after the comparatively joyful nature poems written earlier in his career. He addresses his heart, which, for Hopkins, seems not only the seat of the emotions, but also a sort of conscience. Thus, he uses ‘we’ (see [Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/690)), where the heart, too, is addressed (or apostrophised). In the waking hours of the night, he and his heart have gone along unspecified paths of thought and fantasies.

## Symbolic darkness

The night darkness is symbolic of Hopkins’ emotional and spiritual state, as is the delay of morning light: there is no escape from the dark via the light associated with from God.

Hopkins’ complaint comes in the second quatrain:

* his cries, or laments, are like undeliverable letters
* it is as if God (‘dearest him’) has gone away and not left a forwarding address
* he may be echoing the lament voiced in [Lamentations 3:2](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations); [Lamentations 3:6](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations); [Lamentations 3:8](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations)
* there is no way of getting in touch with God whilst he is away.

## Man without God

Absence is God's ‘deep decree’, and it tastes bitter to Hopkins. In fact, what tastes bitter is himself, his still un[redeemed](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/redeemed) self, under ‘the curse’. This word echoes [Genesis 3:17](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations), where God says to a disobedient [Adam](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Adam):

‘cursed is the ground for thy sake’.

In general Christian teaching, the term ‘cursed’ is used widely of the [fallen](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/fallen)[nature](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/nature) of humans (and in the [New Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/New-Testament) ‘the curse of the law’ ([Galatians 3:13](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_5&fireFunction=initTranslations)) is mentioned).

Hopkins sees the experience of being full of the bitterness of the inner self as being similar to the eventual permanent experience which will befall ‘the lost’:

* The term ‘the lost’ is used in the Bible of all non-believers, as in:

‘For the [Son of man](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Son-of-man) is come to seek and save that which was lost’ ([Luke 19:10](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_6&fireFunction=initTranslations))

or

‘If the gospel is hid, it is hid to them that are lost’ ([2 Corinthians 4:3](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/646#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_7&fireFunction=initTranslations)AV).

* In the poem, the lost are worse off than people of faith, since there is no chance of heaven for them.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* Pick out words that Hopkins uses of ‘the lost’.
  + Does his own dark experience seem to make him more sympathetic to them?
* Does Hopkins seem to you to have lost his faith?

## Darkness

The imagery of night immediately suggests the [dark night (of the soul)](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dark-night-(of-the-soul)) and the sense of God's absence that goes with it ([Lamentations 3:2](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/647#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations); [Lamentations 3:6](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/647#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)). The suffering is spiritually expressed rather than psychologically (see [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602)).

## Bitterness

Words describing the bitterness of the experience: ‘gall’, ‘heartburn’, ‘Bitter’, ‘taste’, echo the book of [Lamentations](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/bible-books/Lamentations) in the [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) ([Lamentations 3:15](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/647#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations);[Lamentations 3:19](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/647#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations) and thus such terms seem appropriate to Hopkins' lament also.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* What is different in the way Hopkins describes the dark night experience here, compared to some of the other sonnets on the same theme?

The symbolism of night and light, and the image of the dead letters have been mentioned, as has the imagery of bitterness in terms of indigestion.

## Yeast

The other memorable image is that of yeast, especially the compound word ‘selfyeast’; the ‘selfyeast of [Hopkins’]spirit’ produces only sourdough. This is a homely and straightforward image, made dramatic by the compound. It has biblical associations of contamination, from the injunction of Jesus to beware the ‘yeast of the Pharisees’ [Matthew 16:11-12](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/648#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations)

## Fell

The ‘fell of dark’ is interesting. Hopkins has used ‘fell’ in [No Worst, There is None](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668), in the sense of ‘fierce’ or ‘terrible’. It could mean that here, too, but ‘a fell’ is also an animal skin, giving the impression of some fierce, smothering force over him as he wakes – the stuff of nightmares.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* Why would you say Hopkins has moved away from nature imagery to images of bodily functions?
* Collect all the images of the body and comment on the list.

## Quiet misery

This is a most uncomfortable sonnet. There are moments of softness, as in ‘To dearest him that lives alas! away’, where the interjection of ‘alas!’ combined with ‘dearest’ and ‘away’ softens the desolation. But such moments are rare.

There is no great sense of drama:

* the tone is understated, adding, in a strange way, to its misery
* the language is very monosyllabic (as with a number of the terrible sonnets): the first line is the most obvious example
* alliteration is muted
* there is little repetition or parallelism.

All this adds to the quiet misery of the poem.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* Does any of the [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration) strike you in reading the poem?
* Work out the percentage of monosyllabic words to polysyllabic ones.
  + Why does Hopkins use such a high proportion, do you think
  + What effect does it have?
* Do you notice an absence of harsh consonant sounds?

## Regularity

The sonnet structure is very similar to [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602) in its neat division of the octave into two [quatrains](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrains), and the sestet into two [tercets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercets). The [rhyming](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyming) of the[sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) is slightly unusual for Hopkins: ccd ccd.

Hopkins’ use of [sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm) is minimal, preferring regular [iambic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic)[pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter)s. The rhythm is only disturbed twice: in ll.5-7 and ll.11-12. Here, the inner torment disturbs the even rhythm by adding extra [stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress)es.

The [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) and mid-line breaks are the only things that show real disturbance, producing a definite [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing.

**Investigating I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark**

* Scan ll.6,11, locating the [spondees](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/spondees).
  + Look at the repetition and play on words as well.
    - What effect does this have on the [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm)?
* In reading the poem aloud, which do you find most effective:
  + to take longer pauses and read it slowly and quietly
  + or to hurry the poem and try to bring out some intensity?
  + Note down your conclusions.

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| **‘Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | PATIENCE, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray, |  | | But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks |  | | Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks; |  | | To do without, take tosses, and obey. |  | | Rare patience roots in these, and, these away, | *5* | | Nowhere. Natural heart’s ivy, Patience masks |  | | Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks |  | | Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day. |  | |  |  | | We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills |  | | To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills | *10* | | Of us we do bid God bend to him even so. |  | | And where is he who more and more distils |  | | Delicious kindness?—He is patient. Patience fills |  | | His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know. |  | |

## The problem of patience

The sonnet was one of those found among Hopkins' papers at his death and was probably written a few years earlier. It clearly indicates the dry and difficult time he was going through, when even being patient seemed almost impossible. More on patience?

More on patience: In earlier poems, Hopkins had not found patience problematic, as in The Starlight Night or The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared. In those two poems, it had formed one of a list of [devotion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/devotion)al duties, ‘patience, [penance](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/penance), prayer’, all necessary for a devout [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian), but all routine. The [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) also lists patience with other such virtues, all part of ‘the [fruit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/fruit) of the [Spirit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Spirit)’:

‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness...’ ([Galatians 5:22](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/674#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations))

Elsewhere in the [New Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/New-Testament), patience is especially for those undergoing persecution and suffering, as in:

‘in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in [Jesus](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus)...’ ([Revelation 1:9](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/674#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)) and ‘we glory in tribulation also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience...’ ([Romans 5:3-4](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/674#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations)).

## Patience in desolation

For those going through the [dark night (of the soul)](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/dark-night-(of-the-soul)) experience, patience becomes a real problem. [Ignatius](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Ignatius) Loyola, the founder of the [Jesuits](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesuits), recognised the possibility of such periods of desolation, and he wrote about them in ‘Rules for the Discernment of [Spirit](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Spirit)s’. In Rule 8 he wrote:

‘Let him who is in desolation strive to remain in patience, which is the virtue contrary to the troubles which harass him; and let him think he will shortly be consoled, making diligent efforts against the desolation.’

St Ignatius, then, sees patience as the thing with which to oppose the troubles Hopkins was undergoing. The sonnet explores exactly this tension.

**Investigating Patience**

* What priority does modern society give to patience?
  + Do you feel patience is a valuable quality?

## An unattractive attribute

Patience is portrayed in the first [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) as being not only hard but also unattractive. It is defined more by negatives:

* We would rather have war and wounds, to be fighting in some good cause
* When there appears nothing worthwhile, we have to exercise patience, ‘do without’, and just ‘take tosses’ without fighting back
* It hardly sounds a virtue, just a negative chore, like scrubbing the classroom floor with a toothbrush.

## Meanings:

* ‘but to’ (l.1) means ‘only to’
* ‘bid for’ (l.2) means ‘ask for, petition’
* ‘wants’ (l.3) can mean ‘lacks’ or its more modern meaning of ‘desires’

### The virtues of patience?

The second [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain) sees some virtue in patience through the image of ivy:

* patience is actually quite rare, and can only grow where there are negatives such as ‘weary...times’ and ‘tasks’. Hopkins had many chores as a teacher, particularly marking hundreds of exam papers and essays
* patience also hides our lost ambitions - ‘wrecked past purpose’ - a telling line, suggesting that if Hopkins had had his say, he would not have remained in the post in which he found himself.

### Two responses

In the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), Hopkins compares the natural man (including himself) with the virtuous man who has learned patience:

* the natural man has a heart that grates upon itself in frustration and rebelliousness
* the virtuous man seems to drop honey by his graciousness.

Hopkins talks about his heart, rather than to it as he does in [I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645). So, unlike that poem, the ‘we’ of l.8 is a generalised ‘we’, meaning people generally, and thus the poem becomes a wider statement than most of the other dark sonnets.

**Investigating Patience**

* 11.9,10 are quite difficult. They could mean:
  + ‘yet even our rebellious hearts do eventually do what God bids us do’

or

* + ‘our rebellious wills fight against everything we bid them do; but even so God bends down to help’

Which do you prefer, and why?

* Explain ‘that comes those ways we know’ (l.14).

## Suffering and faith

Although the dark night experience is implicit here, it is not referred to directly. What is focused on is the difficulty of achieving one of the more straightforward[Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) virtues, when, in fact, suffering is meant to bring it about. So there is a sort of [paradox](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/paradox): without patience, it is difficult to bear inner angst; yet without suffering of some sort, patience does not develop. The ideal of the patient man, described in the last three lines, seems an almost unattainable one.

**Investigating Patience**

* Do you sense any sort of hope in Hopkins that he will achieve patience?
* Do you see another possible theme in Serving God?
  + Is there enough material in the poem for this?

There is more imagery in the sonnet than in its companion sonnets [I Wake and Feel](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645) or [To Seem the Stranger](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/729).

## Ivy

The ivy image is particularly visual, running right through the second [quatrain](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrain). The lines:

‘Natural heart's ivy, Patience masks/ Our ruins of wrecked past purpose’

are memorable in their compactness. Ivy growing over some ruined wall or building is a common sight, hiding the extent of the damage, and actually making it look very picturesque. The image is extended into the next line with the ‘eyes’ or berries and ‘sea of liquid leaves’.

## Other images

* Hearts grating, as opposed to distilling honey
* Filling ‘his crisp combs’ may have borrowed a little from Keats' Ode to Autumn - patience is all but [personified](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/personified)
* The ‘Purple eyes’ and ‘liquid leaves’ of the ivy image also have a Keatsian sensuousness to them.

**Investigating Patience**

* Why should the ivy be described as a ‘sea of liquid leaves’?
* Do you see anything [symbolic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/symbolic) in the ivy?
  + Or is it just an apt natural image?

## Simplicity and compression

The same monosyllabic emphasis of [I Wake and Feel](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645) and [No Worst, there is None](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668) is continued in this poem. It is especially noticeable in ll.3,11 and 14. It is only round the ivy image that a few polysyllables begin to creep in.

The style is staccato, almost in note form at times, as the natural word order is twisted round:

* ‘Patience who asks / Wants war, wants wounds’
* The repetition of ‘wants’ is emphatic, almost like saying ‘wants their head examined’ - except that ‘wants’ here means ‘lacks’.

[Alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Alliteration)s are similarly subdued apart from the w-alliteration of l.3. ‘Rare...roots’ (l.5), and the internal rhyme of ‘rare’ and ‘nowhere’ tie these words together in the much more unified ivy image.

**Investigating Patience**

* ‘Hard thing’ might lead us to anticipate some hard consonants, even though the sound of the word ‘patience’ is soft.
  + What do we get, in fact?
* Would you say the language is disconnected?
  + Or does it flow easily?

## Questions of scansion

As with [I Wake and Feel](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645), the sonnet divides neatly into two quatrains and two[tercets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tercets), which latter also [rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme) in the same way. The [scansion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scansion), however, is much less obvious:

* in the first quatrain, the monosyllable clusters all seem to demand stresses, as: ‘Wánts wár, wánts wóunds;|| wéary his tímes, his tásks;’
* if we withdraw stresses from both ‘wants’, the line almost settles into[iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter)
* however, the echo of the stress remains to set up a [counterpoint](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/counterpoint)ing, as does the pause after ‘wounds’ with the implied [caesura](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesura)
* it becomes a jerky rhythm
* similar clusters as ‘take tosses’, ‘wrecked past purpose’ echo the phrase ‘hard thing’
* should the repeated ‘hard thing’ share a [stress](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/stress), which would make l.1 too short; or do both words carry stresses, in which case the first line is a [hexameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hexameter)?

Rhythmically, therefore, there is no real evidence for any systematic use of[sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm), but it is a rhythm of stops and starts, some smooth, some jerky - which is what we might expect from the subject matter.

**Investigating Patience**

* Do you see any use of [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) that calls for attention?
* If so, what sort of counterpointing is set up?
* Overall, would you say this sonnet was the most focused on one particular topic that you have read so far?
  + Which others are as focused?

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| **My own heart let me have more have pity on; let’** |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | MY own heart let me have more have pity on; let |  | | Me live to my sad self hereafter kind, |  | | Charitable; not live this tormented mind |  | | With this tormented mind tormenting yet. |  | | I cast for comfort I can no more get | *5* | | By groping round my comfortless, than blind |  | | Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find |  | | Thirst ’s all-in-all in all a world of wet. |  | |  |  | | Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise |  | | You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile | *10* | | Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size |  | | At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile |  | | ’s not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies |  | | Betweenpie mountains—lights a lovely mile. |  | |  |  | |

This is one of the 1885 ‘terrible [sonnets](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnets)’ which ‘came unbidden’, one of five poems found in Hopkins' papers after his death. It was written in Ireland and deals with themes similar to those of the other poems of that year - Hopkins’ emotional and spiritual suffering and his lack of comfort whilst working at University College, Dublin.

As in [*Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/690) or [*I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645), Hopkins sets up a dialogue with himself. However, he is not talking to his own heart, but about it, as in [*Patience, Hard Thing!*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/674) He talks to himself as ‘poor Jackself’, pleading with himself to be kind to his heart, and not to allow his ‘tormented mind’ to keep aggravating it. This internally inflicted suffering effectively prevents any sort of relief from being reached.

In the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), he sees that if he could only ‘call off thoughts’, then there might be some room for comfort to take root. This would have to come from God, and it would need to come unbidden. We can't order comfort from God like ordering a pizza from the shop. However, if such unbidden comfort could come, at least occasionally, it would bring some very welcome relief.

**Investigating My Own Heart**

* In what way is Hopkins not being kind to himself?
* Compare this sonnet with [*No Worst, There is None*](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668).
  + What do you see as essential differences?

## Mental suffering

Mental suffering, and how to find relief from it, is clearly the predominating theme. However, unlike other sonnets, Hopkins does not plead directly with God, choosing, rather, gentle persuasion with himself. Unlike No Worst, he seems to feel he has a choice in his behaviour; there is some minimal sense of control.

## Faith

There is also a statement of faith: it is God alone, not Hopkins, who can bring comfort, but it will be in God's own way. There is thus a hint of God's[sovereignty](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sovereignty). Hopkins believes God is in charge and thus his ‘smile's not wrung’ or forced from him.

**Investigating My Own Heart**

* Pick out words of suffering. Set them side by side with words of comfort.
  + Which group seems the stronger?
* Is the very act of having pity on his heart not in itself a comfort?

## Blindness and thirst

Unusually for Hopkins, a [simile](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/simile), in the form of a comparison, is used to carry on his argument. In the second quatrain, he likens his inability to find comfort to a blind man being unable to find daylight or a thirsty man being unable to find water to drink whilst at sea- an image possibly borrowed from Coleridge's poem The Ancient Mariner.

## The divided self

Otherwise, the sonnet is singularly bare in its [imagery](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/imagery), a stark contrast to Hopkins’ earlier sonnets in which each line was dense with images. This is a straightforward inner dialogue, which itself models the figure of the divided self, seen most dramatically in [Carrion Comfort](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602). The idea of mental torment is so commonplace now that it has ceased to be figurative. Even the idea of comfort finding ‘root-room’ is hardly new, even though Hopkins' [compound](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/compound) is.

The one image that does stand out is the final one. See [Compounds](http://www.crossref-it.info/_transform.php?file=1084#Language%20and%20Tone%20-%20Compounds) in Language and tone.

**Investigating My Own Heart**

* What is this final image, and why is it fitting here?

## Ellipsis

The most marked feature of the poem is its [ellipsis](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/ellipsis). This means that words are omitted, concentrating the sense, and leaving us to amplify it with our own understanding. Thus, these lines need the following words adding to make sense:

‘By groping round my comfortless world, than blind  
Eyes in their dark world can find daylight or thirsty person can find (water)’

The actual use of the word ‘room’ is delayed till the next line. Such ellipsis is frequently found in Latin.

## Repetition

There is also the use of repetition, common with Hopkins, as ‘all-in-all in all’ (l.8), or ‘let me’ or ‘let be’. The use of ‘let’ also suggests Hopkins’ tone of pleading and supplication, with himself rather than with God.

## Compounds

One or two of the [compounds](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/compounds) are unusual:

* ‘Jackself’ is formed from the idiomatic use of the name ‘Jack’ to refer to a common fellow or ordinary man and Hopkins addressing himself. He is talking to himself as an ordinary man
* ‘Betweenpie’ is a striking compound: ‘pie’ refers to the meaning ‘pied’ or ‘dappled’, but here it is used as a verb. Thus the compound comes to mean ‘as skies seem dappled when they appear between mountains’, a brief reference to the nature that has previously inspired Hopkins, but which no longer seems in evidence in these dark sonnets
* The lightening of the mood in this last line is well caught in the alliteration of ‘lights a lovely’.

**Investigating My Own Heart**

* Comment on the repetition ‘tormented/tormenting’ in ll.3-4.
  + How does the repetition support its meaning?
* Compare the use of ‘heart’ here to its use in other sonnets; and also ‘mind’.
  + Why does Hopkins not address ‘mind’ in this sonnet?

## Regularity

The sonnet structure is identical to [To Seem the Stranger](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/729), both in its quatrain and sestet structure, its [rhyming](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyming) and even the [enjambement](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambement) pattern. The thought is structured inevitably in much the same way, though the ending here is slightly more upbeat.

## Brevity

The use of ellipsis tends towards short lines, so that the fifth foot of the[pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter) is sometimes hard to find, as in ll.2,5. There is no obvious use of[sprung rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sprung-rhythm), certainly no [outride](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/outride)rs. Most lines fall easily into an [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter) line however, and sometimes the word order is displaced to accommodate this, as in l.1 where ‘more’ is moved in front of ‘have’ to give a more regular [scansion](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/scansion). The regularity emphasises the restrained [tone](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/tone).

## Counterpoint

The marked [enjambements](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/enjambements) with mid-line stops and [caesura](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/caesura)e are the main feature of the counterpointed [rhythms](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythms), a feature that occurs in all these dark sonnets.

**Investigating My Own Heart**

* Scan ll.3,13.
  + Does the rhythm actually suggest torment?
* At what sort of speed do you feel comfortable reading the poem?
* Would you read it softly- and if so, what sounds and words would you emphasise to achieve such an effect?
  + If you would prefer to read it some other way, then what emphasis would you give?

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| **‘Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend’** |
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| *Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum: verumtamen justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.* |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | THOU art indeed just, Lord, if I contend |  | | With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just. |  | | Why do sinners’ ways prosper? and why must |  | | Disappointment all I endeavour end? |  | |  |  | | Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend, | *5* | | How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost |  | | Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust |  | | Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend, |  | | Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes |  | | Now leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again | *10* | | With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes |  | | Them; birds build—but not I build; no, but strain, |  | | Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes. |  | | Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain. |  | |

## Final poems

Hopkins dated this [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) March 17, 1889, when he sent it to his friend Robert Bridges. As Hopkins died in June of the same year, it is thus one of the last three completed poems he ever wrote. He had been in Dublin five years as Professor of Greek at University College, a period of time he described a little earlier as ‘five wasted years….I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise’.

There is about the sonnet some of the frustration of ‘the terrible sonnets’ of 1885, but not the depths of despair some of those sounded. The very fact he is arguing with God suggests he knows [God](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/God) is there to be argued with. And certainly the prayer request at the end suggests a possibility it may be answered.

Of course, in one way it is: a poem is written, which we read to-day as an example of how God can be argued with as well as an expression of our own lack of progress or creativity. This ties in with biographical accounts of Hopkins’ five years in Dublin. Though seeming depressed beyond measure in some of the poems and journals, yet he still managed to live a full life of teaching, socializing, and pursuing interests, as well as fulfilling his obligations to the[Society of Jesus](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Society-of-Jesus), despite bouts of ill health. We need to explore what deeper goals Hopkins felt he was not achieving.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Pick out words and phrases that convey Hopkins’ depression and frustration in the poem

Hopkins is asking God why he, as his servant, does not seem to be achieving anything in life, whilst even the most dissolute people seem to get somewhere, and Nature, God’s creation, is productive and full of new life.

The form of the sonnet is a complaint to God. Such complaints are not so unusual among even devoutly religious people. Hopkins quotes the [Old Testament](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Old-Testament) [prophet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/prophet) [Jeremiah](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jeremiah), in the Latin [Bible](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) (or [Vulgate](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Vulgate)) form the [Roman Catholic church](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Roman-Catholic-church) traditionally used. The actual quotation is from [Jeremiah 12:1](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations), though interestingly Hopkins only quotes the first three lines of the original. The AV reads:

‘Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper….?’

whilst the NIV has it as:

‘You are always righteous, O Lord,/ when I bring a case before you./ Yet I would speak with you about your justice:/ Why does the way of the wicked prosper?’

The fourth line, which in a modern English translation reads: ‘Why do all who are treacherous thrive?’ paralleling the third line, in Hopkins’ sonnet is changed to a much more personal note, ‘and why must/ Disappointment all I endeavour end?’

So unlike Jeremiah, who is apparently concerned in a more general way with the age-old problem of why evil people seem to get on in life, while the good, decent hard-working don’t, Hopkins makes the complaint more personal: ‘Why don’t I get on?’ However, if we read back in Jeremiah into chapter 11, we shall see there, too, that Jeremiah is personally involved: his own fellow townspeople had been plotting to kill him, and he complains: ‘Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it….I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.’ ([Jeremiah 11:19](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations) NIV).

There are other complaints in the Bible, too. Psalm 22 is one of the most famous, briefly quoted by [Jesus](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus) on the [cross](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/cross) when he cried out:

‘My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ ([Matthew 27:46](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations) =[Mark 15:34](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations) = [Psalms 22:1](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_5&fireFunction=initTranslations) KJV)

The [Christian](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) poet, John Milton, who had just gone blind, also asks God in ‘On His Blindness’, another sonnet Hopkins would certainly have known: ‘How can I serve you when I am blind?’ But the Psalms also suggest it is futile to worry about the wicked. In [Psalms 37:2](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/720#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_6&fireFunction=initTranslations), the Psalmist can say

‘for like the grass they will soon wither;/ like green plants they will soon die away’ (NIV)

using the same [imagery](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/imagery) of nature that Hopkins (and Jeremiah) use.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Complaints can be statements or questions. Locate the actual complaints Hopkins makes.
  + Are they statements of facts, or questions?
  + Is he expecting a reply, do you think?

So the main theme is a [theodicy](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theodicy), a [theological](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theological) term which means trying to understand evil in the light of a God who is perfect and who loves justice. In the opening four lines, Hopkins repeats the word ‘just’: the first time it is God who is believed to be just; the second time, it is Hopkins’ complaint. So, which is the more just? Hopkins puts up a good case in the [octave](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave). It is not just occasional disappointments, they are there for ‘all’ he endeavours. If God were his enemy, rather than his supposed friend, could it get worse? (With friends like this, who needs enemies?) Hopkins claims he is spending his whole ‘life upon thy cause’. He is not looking for a big reward; just the recompense of some of his efforts bearing fruit.

As he moves into the [sestet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet), he forgets the sinners - as Psalm 37 suggests he does (‘Do not fret because of evil men’ [Psalms 37:1](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/721#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations), NIV). Ultimately, they are not the problem: his lack of fruitfulness is. Yet in the end, there is no answer, otherwise it would have been discovered centuries ago. However, Hopkins (and we as his readers) need to take something from the poem: it is the final line that suddenly emerges out of the complaint, a heartfelt plea for ‘rain’. In Biblical terms, rain is withheld as a sign of God’s displeasure; its coming is seen as either a sign of acceptance or blessing (a Biblical text that shows this is[Deuteronomy 11:13-15](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/721#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations): ‘So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today….then I will send rain on your land in its season…’ NIV). So Hopkins is asking not only for creativity, but a sense of God’s blessing on his life.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Locate words and phrases that center around the themes of justice and evil.

The nature [imagery](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/imagery) that pervades the whole poem is thus less straightforward than in Hopkins’ earlier poems, where Nature witnesses to God’s presence. Here nature seems much more independent: it gets on with being productive, while Hopkins is totally infertile. He is ‘Time’s eunuch’. The Bible talks of three reasons for being a eunuch, that is, someone whose reproductive functions have been cut off. One is being born as such; another being castrated in some way; the third is a voluntary withholding oneself ‘for the sake of the kingdom of heaven’ ([Matthew 19:12](http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/722#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations)). It might be supposed a Catholic [priest](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/priest) would fall in the third category, but Hopkins sees himself as perhaps in the second. Time has castrated him- nothing voluntary here. It is a strong image.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Locate words that suggest growth and creativity.
* Compare this list with that for (c).
  + Is there any connection, or do we have two separate sets of words and concepts?

The language is very direct. Notice how most words are, in fact, monosyllabic, and being verbs or nouns, take a full stress: ‘thwart’, ‘sots and thralls of lust’, ‘thrive’, ‘spend / Sir, life’, ‘not breed one work that wakes’, and the last line which is entirely monosyllabic. This is so totally opposite to Hopkins’ usual[diction](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/diction) of hyphenated words, made-up polysyllables and so on, it is quite remarkable. It creates a tremendous sense of tension: each word is an explosion of frustration. The [alliteration](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/alliteration) re-inforces this, especially the ‘b’s’, which run throughout the sonnet. Only very occasionally is the tension broken with phrases like ‘fretty chervil’.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Can you locate other significant patters of alliteration?
* What is the force of ‘endeavour’?

The sonnet form is fascinating, too. The [rhyming](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyming) scheme (abbaabba cdcdcd) suggests a [Petrarchan](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Petrarchan) [sonnet](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet), but the division between the octave and sestet is not shown in the sentence structure, which takes the octave well into the ninth line. The poet John Milton used the same feature in a number of his sonnets, to the extent they are sometimes called Miltonic sonnets. The final ‘turn’, as in Milton’s sonnet ‘On His Blindness’, is delayed till the very last line, where the complaint is changed into a prayer.

The other interesting feature is that although each line consists of the ten syllables which we would expect in the [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter) structure of a sonnet, most lines have extra stresses (or [spondees](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/spondees)) because of the monosyllabic choice of diction. Thus the last line would have stresses on ‘mine’, ‘lord’, ‘life’, ‘send’, ‘roots’ and ‘rain’, with the explosive extra stress being on the first word ‘Mine’, which is then echoed by ‘my’ and contrasted to ‘thou’. It takes on a life of its own, detached from any noun, whether that be ‘lord’ or ‘life’. Most other lines can be examined in the same way to show that there are six or even seven stressed syllables instead of the normal four or five.

Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges, this sonnet ‘must be read adagio molto and with great stress.’ We can see why.

**Investigating Thou Art Indeed Just**

* Read the poem out loud at different speeds, bringing out the stressed syllables, and making sure you follow the punctuation.
  + Which speed do you find most satisfying? Why?

|  |
| --- |
| **To R. B.** |
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|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  | | --- | |  | | THE FINE delight that fathers thought; the strong |  | | Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame, |  | | Breathes once and, quenchèd faster than it came, |  | | Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song. |  | | Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long | *5* | | Within her wears, bears, cares and moulds the same: |  | | The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim |  | | Now known and hand at work now never wrong. |  | | Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this; |  | | I want the one rapture of an inspiration. | *10* | | O then if in my lagging lines you miss |  | | The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation, |  | | My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss |  | | Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation. |  | |

The paradox here of course is that, in apologising to his friend Robert Bridges for his lack of inspiration, Hopkins produces one of the most inspired poems in the language.  Look at the way he sustains the sonnet form, not a line of it ‘lagging’, to use his own word, not a part that does not sustain the music and the force of its central metaphor.  The muse’s engendering of a poem in the mind and the mind’s gestation of it are compared to human engendering and the bearing of a child.  I don’t intend to do an exhaustive analysis, trying to say everything possible about texture and rhythm, themes and images.  If a reader does not instantly see the allusions to ejaculation and pregnancy, he or she had better read more and return later:

                                                    the strong

Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,

Breathes once and, quenchèd faster than it came, . . .

There is daring in the alliteration throughout, and in the rhetorical figures, one of them comparing the invasion of the muse to a blowpipe flame, and the sowing of the poetic seed to an orgasm that is ‘quenchèd faster than it came’, the Jesuit priest born in 1844 not flinching from the verb ‘come’.

       The splendid line, ‘the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation’, has been much commended, and this statement of mine indicates that I do, to some extent, back the notion that works of art gain their status over time from a consensus among expert and lay readers alike, though I’m always aware of the pernicious pressures of fashion, and of social, even political, pressures (witness how our 18th century revered the rules of Horace; think of the intolerance the Nazi and Stalin régimes).  This line, ‘the roll, the rise . . .’, begins the last triplet and among other acts helps tie up the themes, via the rhyming of ‘inspiration’ and ‘creation’, which are central ideas. Once I look at the rhymes I notice how elegant and economical they are, the octet relying throughout on *-ong* and *-ame* rhymes, the sestet interlacing *-ation* and *-iss* sounds.  Hopkins was audacious with words and ‘combs’ in line 6 needs some explaining.  From the ordinary meaning of raking hair one could get ‘straightens’ and hence ‘set in order’; from ‘comb’ meaning ‘honeycomb’ one might surmise ‘store’; from ‘comb’ meaning ‘coomb’ (Old English ‘vessel’, later ‘brewing vat’) could be added the sense of containing and fermenting.  It would be typical of Hopkins to imply all these.  As for ‘cares’ in the same line lacking the ‘for’ that it needs if it is to mean ‘tend’, one can find justification in Middle English where ‘for’ was not imperative; Hopkins often leaves out obvious link-words anyway.  At the time he wrote, there was an erudite ruggedness about his poetry which defied convention and which, along with his ascetic diffidence, restrained him from publishing.  It’s easy to see greatness in his work today, after so many developments have made him look almost normal, though still profoundly original.  Finding greatness in a contemporary is often harder than finding mere adequacy.

I should now taste my own medicine and apply these precepts to Hopkins’ poem.  He is confident in the paradox of exhibiting unusual inspiration whilst bemoaning the absence of it.  His defiance of convention in language is bold, too.  Hopkins was a late Victorian and a near contemporary of Hardy and Swinburne, but not even these defiers of convention would have used the phallus allusions of the opening, the packed internal rhyming and rugged alliteration, the obscurity of ‘combs’ and grammatical omission of ‘for’ in:

                Nine months she then, nay years, nine years she long

                Within her wears, bears, cares and combs the same:

       A distinctive voice is immediately evident.  There is an exulting in life through language, with no self-pity even in this conventional lament, which is almost a polite apology.  This determined wrenching of a conventional subject in a conventional form is nonetheless graceful.    He puts the emphasis—on the nature of inspiration—in the octet, the first eight lines.  This is the way the muse impregnates, with the ‘fine delight’ which Hopkins disingenuously (though thence the charm) says he does not have.  The voice of a piece is hard to define.  Usually there in a characteristic style which carries a characteristic attitude to life and with that a tone of voice. Hopkins has a religious fervour towards nature and its Creator, a serious desire to find in words an ‘instress’ or a knotting up of the intrinsic, the thisness of things, the ‘inscape’.

       Exciting language doesn’t have to be doing somersaults; it can be quiet and sweet.  In Hopkins, however, the language is always busy.   Take out a few phrases:

. . . delight that fathers thought . . .

. . . lancing like the blowpipe flame . . .

. . . quenchèd faster than it came . . .

. . . the mind a mother of immortal song.

        Sweet fire the sire of muse . . .

I want the one rapture of an inspiration.

My winter world . . .

. . . yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

Having the verb ‘father’ take ‘thought’ as object; introducing a laboratory blowpipe at all; alluding to ejaculation; comparing a gestating poem to a human embryo; likening mental impregnation to sexual rapture; coming up with ‘My winter world’ as a description of mental sterility: what more originality of language could one ask for?  And there’s more . . . .

       The rhythm is not so extraordinary as in Hopkins’ most audacious pieces but it uses many of the techniques he developed when experimenting with what he called ‘sprung’ rhythm.  This used (1) an idiosyncratic way of counting stresses, allowing three or even more ‘slack’ syllables hang onto a stress instead of the usual one or two; and (2) a fondness for putting two or more heavy syllables together, as in

            str**ó**ng / Sp**úr**                             Br**éa**thes **ó**nce

            L**éa**ves y**é**t                               N**í**ne m**ó**nths

            n**á**y y**éar**s                            n**í**ne y**éar**s

            w**éar**s, b**éar**s, c**áre**s                 **ái**m / N**ów** kn**ów**n

            w**ór**k n**ów** n**é**v-(er)                 Sw**ée**t f**í**re

**ó**ne r**á**p-(ture)                                  bl**í**ss / N**ów** y**íe**lds

            s**ó**me s**ígh**s.

He is not afraid of slipping two extra slack (unstressed) syllables into a normally five-iambus line:

         Leaves **yet** | the **mind** | a **moth-** | er of im-**mor**- | tal **song**.

There are other ways of scanning this but I’ve used the one he would have favoured himself. Learning chiefly from each other, poets make up their own rules of scansion.  Hopkins went back to Anglo-Saxon metrics and invented a method of counting stresses that was eccentric: another mark of his style.  What his rhythm, or ‘tune’ as I’ve called it, does to help make this a fine poem is to advance the sense and, along with the texture, create an uplifting music that I’d want to listen to even if the sense were less interesting.

       Although not lush like Keats, Hopkins and Keats are to me among the most remarkable poets for texture: they both have an extraordinary instinct for finding the sounds they want for coaxing along their music.  See how the vowel-sounds dip and rise, close and open, in:

         (Leaves yet the) m**i**nd a m**o**ther of imm**or**tal s**ong**.

Look at the alliteration in every line, often double as in:

I **w**ánt the **ó**ne **r**áp-ture of an ín-spi-**r**átion

and of course in:

         The **r**óll, the **r**íse, the **c**á-rol, the cre-á-tion.

The ‘cre-á-tion’ disobeys the rules—only accented syllables are supposed to alliterate, but what the hell, you can break your own rules, and I seem to remember that there is precedence in Anglo-Saxon anyway.  This is but a brief note on texture; there are some, myself included, who think the weave of sound among the most affecting and effective ingredients, level with sense itself.

       But the sense is decisive.  Drivel and platitude are non-starters: however clever the music, banality embarrasses.  That said, a poet does not have to be saying anything of shattering originality: he or she might bitch about being jilted, about failing to expand the pupils and other parts of a beloved, saying stuff heard a thousand times before, yet still turn out a great poem. Hopkins is not the first to lament the absence of the muse; the condition is not unusual and having a man apologising for it in verse does not add much to our sense of the horror of the human condition.  Poetic statements do not have to surprise, though it helps if they do.  It’s not silly for a poet to worry about writer’s block, but he’d better say it in a way we wouldn’t have thought of ourselves.  And, as I’ve said above, he’d better be emotionally logical—even factually logical if the facts are slippery.  For instance, I have to think twice when I come to the lines:

         The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim

         Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

The mind has been impregnated with the seed of a poem which might take nine months, even nine years, to develop.  But pregnancies do not make widows.  The logic here tells us that after the planting of the seed the muse retires.  The rest is sweat and tears.  ‘The widow of an insight lost’ must mean that the muse, the fathering spirit, was momentarily like a husband, but it didn’t stay around to help develop the seed, that first idea or feeling for a poem.  The muse is the insight, and the insight leaves behind the seed.  I find this logically awkward; it would be better if the seed were the insight, but this is not what Hopkins has implied.  The muse, the insight, leaves after the seed is sown.  The womb of the mind must then nurture the seed even when the rapture of inspiration and the flash of insight are over.  The poet nevertheless knows what to do, that is to labour with ‘aim / Now known and hand at work now never wrong’.  I therefore find the last two lines of the octet the least satisfactory: I can force the logic to work somehow but I’m not happy about it.  Behind the insight-muse that leaves a seed is the implanting father / fire / sire: to the Catholic priest this can only mean God.  And that ties in with ‘immortal song’, ‘the carol, the creation’: poems are sacred devisings, they emanate from the divine.  I find the logic of this acceptable but I am even more impressed by the logic that keeps lacing together the images surrounding pregnancy and creation, the logic which leads to the brief sadness at the end concerning the mental barrenness of this poet’s ‘winter world’.

       Of *plot tension* and *rhetorical compression* (the counterbalancing elements of construction) I’ve written elsewhere.  Here the tension of ‘what is going on’ is for me satisfactorily dissipated by the end when I understand that he has tried desperately to convey how physical is the feeling of being touched by the divine spark.  It’s like a one-night (or one-second) stand with God; it’s like being fucked in the brain and dumped.  Then how forlorn is the barren feeling of not having been about a work of words for a long time!

       As for rhetorical compression, it is my belief that the better the poem the longer its language lingers in the mind, sustaining and famishing.  For instance, I’ve read this poem many times—indeed I know it by heart—but I’ve only now in writing this essay seen how to Hopkins a poem might be written long after the first intimation.  His Christian God the Father comes to him as a thunderbolt, with a road-to-Damascus insight, impregnating and then leaving him to nurture the seed with laborious patience.  It will take me forever to work this idea out in terms of my own beliefs about the mind and the world.  I may never succeed yet I can’t see myself ever tiring of this poem.

       As for ‘pattern of words’, ‘structure’, ‘form’, what has to be said that I haven’t touched on?  Only this: I can return to this poem for the pleasure of being reminded of how compactly the words fit the sonnet form and the rhyme-scheme.  I like how the verb ‘fathers’ in the opening of the octet is picked up by ‘sire’ at the start of the sestet.  I like how fire is invoked across that span.  I like the way a fertile mind’s confidence in caring for a poetic seed contrasts with the sad and lagging feeling of uninspired emptiness.  I like the way that emptiness would dearly love the honeycomb of the mind to buzz with life.  I like ‘The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation’.

His final poem, “[To R. B.](http://www.bartelby.org/122/51.html),” was an abbreviated address toward his friend [Robert Bridges](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bridges). Invocation, in imagining a recipient, creates the apparition of time as the boundaries of the poetic action—composition and reading—are formed and dictated. “To R.B.” as a whole is a useful example of how Hopkins was able to create poem as artifice and as a dynamic work of time, not to mention offering a narrator steeped in yearning.

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[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bridges)“To R. B.” is often read as punctuation upon a literary career, and as the final work of Hopkins’s canon the poem is often appropriated as ultimate proof of his aesthetic and theological allegiances, although the poem is most appealing as the apex of Hopkins’s practice with the sonnet as a form. Of all the fixed patterns of poetry, the sonnet is at once the most temporal and structured, an oxymoronic box of a poem. Subsequent rereadings of “To R. B.” resist strict placement within the Hopkins library, and the poem is best elucidated as its form commands: line by line, forward-thinking yet backward aware.

Hopkins was less a student of the [Petrarchan sonnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrarchan_sonnet)than an admirer: “it was the form itself rather than the work of earlier sonneteers that most interested him” (Mariani 321). In this sonnet, Hopkins retains his rhythms while maintaining the form. The first octave contains two sentences. The four lines of the first sentence all work as individual lines, and three of them are end-stopped. The four lines of the second sentence are broken halfway by a strong colon. All these lines progress forward because of the rhyme expectation of the sonnet, which also creates curious repercussions for content: since in the Petrarchan style of “To R.B.” the end-word of the first line rhymes with the fourth line, these two lines are connected, and the middle two lines are both compressed and linked. “The fine delight that fathers thought” is compared to “the blowpipe flame” in line two, which is “quenchèd” in the third line: the middle two rhyming lines of this first quatrain both begin and end a simile. The fourth line returns to the original, lost inspiration of the first line. These relationships among lines are a strength of the sonnet form; rectangle-like, the sonnet’s boundaries force the poet to finish a thought. Such concision also builds a concrete sense of time: if we consider time as a difference or separation between events, then poetry is almost a temporal experiment, an act in measure existence.

The entire first octave of “To R. B.” proceeds in the past, but the poem becomes an explanation of the narrator’s present lack of inspiration. Here the structure of the sonnet becomes paramount, and the narrator’s shift works because of the expected volta of the ninth line: “Sweet fire the sire of muse, my soul needs this.” The sonnet is a form suited to irony because of this volta: the narrator wonders if “in my lagging lines you miss / The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,” yet his “winter-world” of non-inspiration has somehow created this sonnet. How often do we see such yearning in flash fiction, or any fiction, for that matter?

Although the [volta](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1363412/volta" \t "_blank) begins at the ninth line, the poem’s final two lines—“My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss / Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation”—further the turn of the poem. Hopkins has made this sonnet almost a triptych, a three part piece that begins with the memory of fleeting inspiration, followed by a present lack of inspiration, and then, the reason for this present lack of inspiration. While Timothy F. Jackson has claimed that “there are no questions in this poem, as though Hopkins is filled with peace,” the central metaphor of “the mind a mother of immortal song” pleads otherwise (123). If one is to be collective in the work of Hopkins, then it should be considered that here the narrator alludes to the virgin mother. It is also curious that the narrator chooses “nine” months and years: certainly practical and biological timelines of birth abound but nine is also the Trinity triplicated, and this is nothing if not a poem that is aware of its triple structure. The questions inherent in the poem are subtle and yet important: how aware is the narrator of the poem’s inherent irony, and how aware will the invoked recipient of this poem, Robert Bridges, be of the narrator’s feigned inadequacies? The poem must be read with Bridges in mind; it is foremost an epistolary work, and certainly Hopkins was aware that his usage of both second-person and collective pronouns in the final line—“yields you, with some sighs, our explanation”—would inextricably connect the narrator as poet to the said inspiration. On second consideration, such a poem that questions a religious poet’s ability to produce could have been written to no other than Bridges, Hopkins’s posthumous publisher. Although Ron Hansen first notes that “English literature owes Robert Bridges a great debt for his responsible pasting of the handwritten poems into a blank book as he got them, for Hopkins himself was notoriously nonchalant about their preservation,” he also concedes the theological complexity of their relationship: “crucially important to the Catholic priest was the state of Bridges’s soul, for his Anglican faith was never orthodox and he seemed at times an atheist” (89, 92). At the time of Hopkins’s composition of “To R.B.,” the poet and Bridges were relatively estranged, and this final poem could be the last hope for reconciliation.

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The final turn of “To R. B.” is small, yet reveals how much Hopkins accomplishes in this sonnet. The pacing within the final four lines changes dramatically, from the rolling, list-like twelfth line, “The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,” to the explanatory final line, slowed to a stroll by commas. The sonnet may be considered the most athletic of poetic forms; its prescribed route and changes of pace mirror the travails of a half-miler. The narrator may be running in place in this poem—he claims to still lack inspiration—but Hopkins has bounded, bounced, leaped long within the enabling box of the sonnet.

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Hopkins’s temporal skill complicates Butler’s theory of atemporal poetry. Not to mention that perhaps no writer was more epiphanic than Hopkins, not even Joyce, whom Butler references as his lone evidence within the brief essay. The canon of Hopkins contains yearning; the narrator of “To R.B.” yearns with more existential force than most characters in contemporary flash fiction. Yearning is an inadequate delineation between prose and poetry. The term and emotion require further unpacking, but Butler is correct to imply that a critical definition of flash fiction is needed. It is unacceptable to claim that word count is an adequate barometer of form. Butler, intent on being “brief,” remained true to the literary form of which he spoke, but his theory is only one side of a necessary conversation.

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